

When reading of Aristotle, you will get all sorts of remarks about how he breaks with Plato and Plato's philosophical approach. In some respects, this is true. However, what one needs to be careful is this one fact: those who are practitioners of a discipline tend to be very poor at doing history of their discipline; and why should such a specialist be good at figuring out and retelling the history of their discipline—they are not historians or trained in history. This is the case for philosophers telling the history of philosophy, physicists telling the history of physics, or whatever. What one finds in these retellings by professionals in a discipline is that the history of philosophy is usually told in a whiggish manner, with an eye toward what is to come, rather than understanding historical developments on their own terms, and not as something that happens for the sake of culminating in present ideas. In other words, we ought not to do, as some have done, looking at all of history as some debate between philosophical schools that didn't even exist at the date discussed. For this reason, viewing Plato and Aristotle as a clash between proto-idealistic and proto-empirical schools is simplistic, missing the bulk of the real history and what the historical narrative has for to learn.<sup>1</sup> Sure, there is something to be gleaned from this simplistic and all-too-hackneyed view; but it is a small moiety of what is really available.

The error commonly espoused by philosophers doing history of philosophy is that Aristotle

We get a better sense of what Aristotle was up to, when we put into perspective the world that he lived in. It was:

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<sup>1</sup> One of the major problems with exceptionally specialized fields is that the historian must be well versed in the technical side of the discipline. That's why Herman's *The Cave and the Light* was an absolute and utter failure: he didn't have much of a nuanced grasp of the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato—or subsequent philosophers!—to do his thesis justice. Therefore, the issue is not merely that specialists have their perspective too thoroughly embedded in the contemporary development of their discipline, but also that historians, not having specialized in the actual discipline, fail to have sufficient grasp of material to wield it in historiography.

‘[a] place where people appease[d] powerful gods by killing animals; where fortune-tellers burn[ed] oxtails to determine what the future will be; where slavery is taken for granted; and where [were] women generally confined to their homes and are infrequently seen in public. It was a place where few people [could] read, and crowds gather[ed] to hear poets recite the long epics of Homer from memory. This was the Greek world of Aristotle. ... They were polytheists who believed in a vast hierarchy of gods, spirits, demigods, and nymphs.’<sup>2</sup>

Rather than Aristotle merely making a break with Plato’s brand of philosophy, which is typically viewed as “idealistic” —a word you will not come to grasp until the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century in our history—, but a new kind of revolt against μῦθος. The reader should note that, in this last sentence, by the mere introduction of an anachronistic term, “idealistic,” one is already talking about understanding history backwards, not forwards, not on its own terms. If all the better one can do is understand philosopher and his thought in terms of later thought, then one has not properly understood that thinker; this is a certainty. That aside, Aristotle’s revolt against μῦθος may be viewed as break from the Greek tradition, the anthropocentric view, and generation-to-generation story-telling, in that Aristotle provides a new way to view the world from a set of eyes. Here, I must emphasize “view”: this is not meant to be a metaphorical or abstract usage, but a quite literal change in seeing. Rather than advancing a complete disregard for the senses, Aristotle’s philosophy will alienate the human from his and her senses by creating numerous distinctions, institution frameworks that were not there before, and by creating an interpretive framework *that will become commonsense*. This last point is Aristotle’s great unacknowledged achievement, and it is being acknowledge by proxy when modern scientists and those with a limited understanding of history remark that Aristotle was the first scientist or the creator of science, or some such nonsense.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomson, Garrett, and Marshall Missner. *On Aristotle* (Wadsworth Philosophers Series). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000. p. 1

One of the ways in which Aristotle altered commonsense was through creating a compartmentalized and categorized view of the world. The ancient Greeks had a holistic view of the universe. Many spoke of the world as an animal, wherein all things are interconnected and there is a harmony, even if a dynamism keeps things unbalanced and in motion. In fact, this is what the Greek word, “κόσμος” (English: “cosmos”), means: it’s an interconnected unity that possesses a harmony and ordering. The way that we view the world, in which disciplines of study, breakdown of material artefact and commodity production, systematic division of labor, and taxonomical distinctions of any variety simply did not exist in the time before Aristotle.

Thomson and Missner note:

‘Another important difference between intellectual life in ancient Greece and our own is that knowledge was not yet compartmentalized into different areas, such as natural sciences, social sciences and humanities. We assume a fragmentation of knowledge into disciplines, each with its own special methods, but no such notion was established in Greece, and it was Aristotle, more than anyone, who first suggested and then worked out the different methods that are needed to study different questions.’<sup>3</sup>

It was in this way that Aristotle swapped out a generic and much more natural anthropocentric view, that all phenomena are a similar to one another, and replaced it with one that implicitly understood the world as a collection of absolutely distinct things. It is this interpretive framework, with its vocabulary, that would instigate a fracture view of reality, in which objects of the phenomenal world are composites, not themselves wholes. In this way, Aristotle does have a link to the necessary conditions for something like we know today as “science.”

However, to see Aristotle as the first scientist, while ignoring how his attack on μῦθος was an alienation from natural interconnectedness, is to miss the truly valuable historical point for the

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<sup>3</sup> Thomson, Garrett, and Marshall Missner. *On Aristotle* (Wadsworth Philosophers Series). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000. p. 1

sake of naming an important historical figure a “father of science.” What’s valuable is that Aristotle is responsible for doing something to the human perspective, which Jewish philosophy<sup>4</sup> usually gets sole credit for, namely, inducing a break between humanity and Nature. The idea of a passive, objective observer, not possessing any connection, causal or otherwise, with natural phenomena, was one that was foreign before Aristotle’s time. Before him, humans understood themselves to be a part of a situation, not apart from it. This is a valuable point in understanding what Aristotle’s philosophy accomplished. Most of all, this distinction amounts to a break between humans and human reality. Without seeing what is to come in the history of philosophy, it is difficult to appreciate this fact, but it has everything to do with establishing an objective viewpoint and determining the value, or lack thereof, of the anthropocentric view. Aristotle’s distinctions of kinds of motion, distinguishing human artefacts (as products that have gone through change) from natural changes, such as water that seems to become earth, sets humanity apart from Nature.

One idea that may strike the reader once mentioned, though not having arrived it before, is that Plato thought that the mind and knowledge (i.e., Truth) were simple, in that sense that there was no distinction between them, whereas Aristotle thinks that knowledge is something that they are not one. Recall discussions, such as that from the *Meno*: Plato pushes the reader to acknowledge, just as Socrates said in his own defense at his trial, that he did not put something in the mind that was not already there. He did not teach in this way, but was a midwife, helping something to come forth that is already in the mind. Aristotle held the view that some sort of consultation with the senses was required to know things. This makes for further distinction

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<sup>4</sup> I am, here, referring to the fact that the time leading up to the Aliyah in the Tanakh may be understood as a separation between Nature and humanity through the dichotomy of natural magick versus holy (i.e., literally, “set-apart-ness), the dichotomy between the Egyptian gods (all representatives of Nature) and YHWH (again, the holy agent in the story), and Egypt’s reliance upon nature (cyclical Nile flooding with agricultural repercussions) versus holy Providence in the desert.

between humanity and natural world, as there is an epistemic gap that must be overcome, in order for the mind to come to know. Internal to Aristotle's epistemology is an unrecognized contradiction: while the mind is distinct from truth out there, in the world, there is a deep connection between metaphysics and logic: "Thinking, as Aristotle saw it, was connected with the way things are, and this underlies the close relation between logic and metaphysics."<sup>5</sup> For all of those philosophers and historians of philosophy who have commented on the difficulty that lies in the problem of participation in Plato, no one ever asks how the mind might be distinct from the ontology of the world, yet exist a link between thinking and metaphysics. Whatever problem exists in constructing a framework for participation, the contradiction of a simultaneous epistemic link and gap seems insurmountable; and so, it is not as the otherwise-praiseworthy Robert C. Solomon has remarked, that Aristotle 'eliminates any need to appeal to Plato's mysterious Forms' —but, of course, Solomon was a card-carrying Aristotelian.

A natural question should arise: Granted that there does seem to be something like a break between Plato and Aristotle, why did it come to be? Thinking to some of our other philosophers, there were breaks between teachers and students, but these differences entailed similarities in approaches, if there was any difference at all. If we think to Thales and Anaximander, they approached things similarly, asked the same questions, but got different answers. The Eleatics were all peas in a pod, asking the same question and deriving complementary answers to the question. Socrates and Plato, if Plato is to be trusted, were in lockstep. Since Aristotle was educated at the Academy in Athens, Plato's school, why did Aristotle have such a different approach? Just as important, when did Aristotle's philosophy make a break with Plato's? My conjecture is that part of the reason is political and part of the

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<sup>5</sup> Stumpf, Enoch. *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy*. 7th ed. Boston: McGrawhill, 2008. p. 71

reason is about the nature of natural ability and Aristotle's intellectual gifts. After Plato died, Aristotle was among one of very few candidates to take up as head of the school, and was even considered the "mind of the school," up to that point.<sup>6</sup> However, he was not chosen, and I suspect he resented this. Most historians of philosophy take this information to suppose that a break between their philosophies had already come, but the fact of the matter was that Aristotle remained at the Academy until Plato's death, operating as a lead lecturer, if not *the* lead lecturer. All of this leads me to reflect upon Enoch Stumpf's question<sup>7</sup> about the timing of divergence Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy, and suspect that this break with Aristotle came at the time when he was passed over for headmaster of the Academy; one cannot go from preeminent status to someone of less-than-such status, in most social and political cases. Evidence for the resentment I suggest comes in the fact that he almost immediately left Athens after the decision came. Historians of philosophy are always very quick to associated Aristotle's attributed words, the he would not allow Athens to sin against philosophy a second time, with the charge of impiety also levied at Socrates; but this not clear, and Aristotle never even so much a met Socrates, so to assume that Aristotle would have felt so strongly as to see Socrates' treatment as sin is unclear. On the other hand, if he felt that he was the true and rightful successor of Plato, and that this was the first sin, in Aristotle's eyes, against philosophy, it could well be that a second —this time, real— exile from Athens would make sense. I further conjecture that he had to distinguish his philosophical pursuits from those of the Academy, and he had the interests and natural ability —most of all, the new questions— to do it. On the point of natural ability and the kind of intellectual gifts that Aristotle had, it seems reasonable that Aristotle was an aesthetically and emotionally intelligent, and gifted in, what one might call, "the wisdom tradition in

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<sup>6</sup> Stumpf, Enoch. *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy*. 7th ed. Boston: McGrawhill, 2008. p. 68

<sup>7</sup> Stumpf, Enoch. *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy*. 7th ed. Boston: McGrawhill, 2008. p. 68

philosophy.” Based on the writings we have from Aristotle, it is not clear that Aristotle was never proven to be a very good mathematician or practical inquirer and investigator of natural phenomena, as Plato desired of the students in his Academy. Some have passed this off as a ‘lack of interest,’<sup>8</sup> but I think this is a wrongheaded (and ignorant) presumption, being that he certainly enjoyed producing the products of systematized thought (syllogisms, etc.). It’s worth noting that astutely aware and contemplative philosophers doing history of philosophy have thought it peculiar that Aristotle didn’t ‘tackle mathematics’.<sup>9</sup> We do know that Aristotle was given the best education available for someone being pushed to cultivate rational thought, just as the Academy’s archway stated Plato’s imperative: “Let no one enter who has not first studied geometry.” The rigorous and systematic thinking ability Aristotle acquired, in conjunction with his very different set of natural gifts and kinds of intelligence, made Aristotle a unique thinker who differed quite a bit from Plato. Aristotle reflected the educational hopes and dreams of Aristotle, while having comparable aesthetic, wisdom, and emotional varieties of intelligence. This can be supported in a systematic analysis of Aristotle’s works, but the most appreciably different aspect of Aristotle’s interests, and that which brings quite a few biologists to refer to Aristotle as a biologist, was his cataloging of varieties of animals and developing a taxonomy of them. Even in today’s scientific climate, those who do descriptive science, which requires exceptional astuteness in observational skills, are viewed as being more aesthetically inclined than those of theoretical disciplines, like physics or chemistry. Historically, early modern biology finds itself ignited by aesthetes, such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and some of its best ideas by noted aesthetes like Charles Darwin. Given this, it is not so much a conjecture, but more like a hypothesis that Aristotle was so gifted. The sad truth is that, while being the first

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<sup>8</sup> Stumpf, Enoch. *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy*. 7th ed. Boston: McGrawhill, 2008. p. 69

<sup>9</sup> Solomon, Robert C. *A Short History of Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. p. 57

person to codify formal logic, Aristotle likely didn't have the abstract thinking ability requisite of a logician in the modern-day analytic tradition.

Quite a bit can be said about Aristotle's works to drive home the fact that Aristotle was less abstractly minded than his Platonic cohorts, and I mean this in a sort of psychoanalytic sense. That Aristotle sought to replace Plato's idea of recall or remembrance of knowledge with a kind of immediate intuition, as commonsense indicates that we learn of, say, a cup's presence through seeing. Unlike many of Aristotle's peers, his treatises are not on engineering-like content or mathematical expositions, but on learning about systems through his eyes. Even his logic is organized on the basis of how one collates objects, as particulars, into classes of various similarities, a sort of proto-Venn diagrammatic approach to logic, and certainly not the symbolic logic approach that exists today. It may be clear that this misunderstanding of the role of visual and other aesthetic experience is where historians of philosophy typically confuse the distinction between Plato and Aristotle. It is not that Aristotle was breaking from Plato, because he was rejecting the method. It is clear that both the content of the education at Plato's Academy was important and interesting to Aristotle—enough so that he obviously passed on a superlative knowledge and appreciation of practical arts and engineering-like knowledge to Alexander the Great—, and the systematic-mindedness of the Academy stuck; but Aristotle learned through visual imagination and senses, while Plato's other students thought abstractly. Moreover, Aristotle delights in taking in experiences and, by extension, knowledge through his sense, as he states in his *Metaphysics*.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, I argue, the reason Aristotle is beholden to such disparate philosophical pursuits as cataloging organisms by appearance, determining what qualities in dramas best induce emotional catharsis, and using visual judgments to determine

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<sup>10</sup> Stumpf, Enoch. *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy*. 7th ed. Boston: McGrawhill, 2008. p. 73



right action is this triumvirate of intellectual qualities that Aristotle exudes, namely, emotional, aesthetic, and wisdom intelligences. From this, Aristotle is far less like a modern scientist than many moderns conceive, and much more like a poet or aesthete *par excellence*, like a Goethe, a Nabokov, or a Duchamp, or, if a scientist, then someone like Rachel Carson; but certainly not the Kripke of Kripkes, a Feynman of Feynmans, or the Turing of Turings.

Drawn to sense experience because of his apparent capacities, Aristotle spends much more time giving his attention to motion, not to undermine it, as the Eleatics and Plato did, but to center metaphysical explanations about motion, change, action, and becoming —being in a verb sense, not a static sense of perpetual, unaltered presence. On this last point, Heidegger’s history of philosophy is very valuable, as he notes that Aristotle’s emphasis was on being as a verb, not in the sense of a noun. Even in Aristotle’s version of “form,” in going against Plato’s “form” that might be considered to be potential, in the sense that Plato’s forms are never manifest in the world around us, Aristotle focuses on what is actually present before our eyes. In training his intellectual focus in this way, he gives metaphysical priority to actuality over potentiality.

In the continuing project of

‘Aristotle looked at life through the eyes of a biologist. For him nature was *life*. All things are in motion —in the process of becoming and dying away’ (Stumpf p. 77)