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Universals and Particulars: Aristotle's Ontological Theory and Criticism of the Platonic Forms

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"To say that Forms are patterns and that other things participate in them is empty talk, mere poetic metaphors."

Aristotle – *Metaphysics*.

As a staunch empiricist and systematic thinker, Aristotle found little appeal in Plato's theory of Forms. Proponents of this theory argued that all material objects are based on universal, immutable concepts called Forms and that for a thing to exist it must share or participate in these Forms. Ultimately, this theory holds that knowledge cannot be derived through our perception of sensible things, but only through our contemplation of the Forms, a position contrary to Aristotle's. Instead, Aristotle argues that reality is not dependent on universal abstracts (Forms), but on particular substances of physical things. As such, Aristotle holds that we can ground our beliefs in the sensible world with some assurance.

At the heart of Aristotle's criticism of Plato's Theory of Forms is the idea that universals are not separate from particulars. Platonists argue that each material object has its own corresponding Form(s), which is not embodied in the object itself, but separate from it. For example, things are said to be beautiful in so much as they participate in the Form of Beauty, which is detached from the sensible world. So a woman is beautiful in so much as she reflects the Form of Beauty, not in that she embodies the Form of beauty. In this case, a particular (the woman) shares in a separate, detached universal (the Form), as opposed to the Form of Beauty being an inherent or intrinsic quality of the woman.

Aristotle refutes this separation of universals from particulars in two simple ways: first, he argues that Forms cannot constitute a substance; and, secondly, that since Forms are not substances, Forms cannot cause a substance's coming into being. While Platonists hold that Forms are detached, non-physical entities that underlie—and cause—physical things, Aristotle is quick to point out the impossibility of such a claim: "It would seem impossible for a substance to be separate from what it is the substance of. How, then, if the Forms are the substances of things, could they be separate from them" (*Metaphysics* 991b). How is it, Aristotle is asking, that a non-substance (the Forms) can affect the qualities of a substance (the object of a Form)?

He addresses the impossibility of this problem in Book II of the *Physics* by introducing four causes responsible for a things change: the material, formal, efficient, and final cause. Of these four causes, the Platonic Forms fails to explain two—that is, the material cause and the efficient cause. Aristotle defines the efficient cause as the “source of the primary principle of change or stability” (194b30). Because the Forms are non-substances, it is impossible, according to Aristotle, for a physical object’s substance to be primarily determined by its Form, especially considering that a Form is nothing more than a universal concept. And since an object’s Form is a non-material, it would seem impossible for it to be the efficient cause of the object, simply for the reason that, as a non-material, no physical causation is possible.

Aristotle also points out that if Forms underlie and cause all physical objects, then even the most odd and remote object will have its own form. “[S]ome [Proofs] yield Forms of things that we think have no Forms,” he states (*Metaphysics* 990b10) as an example. It would certainly be a stretch to conceive that dust and lint have their own Forms. If this were so, then the Theory of Forms would designate Forms to the most trifling and minute objects that, to us, would seem ridiculous. And for this reason, Aristotle felt that such a theory did not provide insight into and knowledge about the physical world.

Instead, Aristotle proposes the idea that universal concepts are not separate from particular things, but merely commonalities shared by objects. Take two yellow flowers, a marigold and a buttercup, for example. According to a Platonist, the yellow marigold and buttercup exist and are yellow because they both share in the Form of Yellow. Yet it would seem that both flowers’ color and existence are caused by several Forms: the Form of Yellow, Flower, and Yellow Flower. And for Aristotle, this mingling and sharing of numerous Forms seems implausible and empty. Instead, Aristotle believes that the marigold and buttercup’s color is not caused by a detached Form, but that their color is simply a shared quality among the two flowers. The universal is not separate from a particular but inherent in it.

Indeed, the cornerstone of Aristotle’s ontology is his theory that reality is based on the substances of physical objects, not Forms. “‘What is being?’ is just the question ‘What is substance?’” Aristotle states in the *Metaphysics* (1028b5). Aristotle conceives that our understanding of what is real is simply a matter of understanding the relationship between particular substances and their universal qualities. Of course, the question raised here is what does Aristotle mean by substance? He offers an account of what a substance is in Book V of the *Metaphysics*: “Substance is spoken of in two ways. It is both the ultimate subject, which is no longer said of anything else, and whatever, being a this, is also separable” (1017b25). A substance, then, is individual and

particular, which is not predicated of other things, but other things are predicated of it.

To understand what Aristotle means by substances being particulars that are subject to predication, we turn to the *Categories*. Here Aristotle offers ten classes of being such as quantity, quality, where, and relative to name a few. In essence, Aristotle is showing that there are many ways of being. For instance, things are often said to be of a certain color, shape, size, or in a certain location. But of the ten classes offered, the thing being predicated on, the substance, takes priority. This is crucial in that, while there are many ways of being (more than the ten offered by in the *Categories*), Aristotle is arguing that all classes of being are in some way dependent on substance—that is, that universal predications are dependent on particular substances.

For example, let us return to the yellow marigold and buttercup. Of the qualities shared by these flowers is the color yellow (i.e. yellow is predicated on both). By describing the marigold and buttercup as yellow, we are making reference to their substance. A thing—a substance—must exist in order for it to be called yellow, just as person must exist before we describe him as healthy. Instead of attributing a particular’s (each flower) existence to the universal’s (the color Yellow), a view held by Platonists, Aristotle maintains the opposite: that particulars are the bases of reality and share universal commonalities, that universals depend on particular substances. At the heart of this argument is that substance is a primary principle of being, whereas universal predications are merely secondary.

Furthermore, like Plato, Aristotle understood that all physical substances are continually in motion and changing. In Book I of the *Physics*, Aristotle explains that objects can change through many ways, such as addition, subtraction, or alteration, and that each change can be attributed to four specific causes (as I mentioned earlier). For example, a once solid and strong log can be made hollow and soft by insects. In this instance, a log passes from one state to another. What Aristotle is concerned with here is the element which persists throughout the change, which is the substance, “the things that are without qualification” (190b). Therefore particulars, that is, substances, also consist of form and stuff. A ball of clay, for instance, can be molded continuously but the clay itself, the substance, persists throughout.

On the other hand, Aristotle is quick to point out in the *Physics* and *Metaphysics* that in order for a substance to change it must have the potential to do so. Things can only change in so far as they are changeable. For example, as human beings we can use our reasoning faculties to find happiness and flourish in life in so far as we are potentially reasonable. Indeed, the main goal for us as human beings—and most other living things such as plants and animals—according to Aristotle, is to actualize our potentials. In

this way, particulars are continually changing in accordance with the potentials inherent in them.

However, unlike Plato, Aristotle holds this constant change of objects in the physical world as a movement towards a more perfected end goal. Plato maintained that particular things continually change in so far as things may deform or degrade and, thus, are unreliable to our senses. It is the universal Form of these physical objects that offers reliability. On the other hand, Aristotle dismisses this. Aristotle believes that substances or particulars do not suffer a continual degradation, but go through a process of perfection in that each living thing strives to actualize its potentials. Thus, life becomes a process of actualization and perfection instead of degradation and corruption.

Although both Plato and Aristotle claim that there is an objective reality underpinning the physical world and that the world is knowable, Aristotle's ontology offers a more pragmatic and plausible theory in that he grounds his epistemology, theory of knowledge, in the physical world. Knowledge of what is real, according to Plato, is conferred by the Forms. But what are the Forms? Plato claims that they are immutable, universal concepts that underpin all objects, yet no one can prove their existence – not even Plato. In this way, Plato's theory becomes mystical and faith-based (Indeed at the heart of Plato's *Metaphysical* theory is that the soul is immortal, a belief that cannot be proven nor disproved).

Aristotle, on the other hand, grounds reality on the sensible world, stating that reality is based on individual (particular) substances. In this way, an understanding of what is real can be attained through the observation and testing of individual things—that is, the reality of things can be scientifically explored. This, of course, seems more appealing in that our beliefs, being grounded on physical objects, hold some truth. It is also more appealing and plausible in that Aristotle epistemology through particulars is accessible by all people not just a few. Plato held that only a few people could understand the Forms using dialectics and mathematics. The few who are able grasp the Forms, the philosophers, were obligated to help enlighten their fellow contemporaries, a belief he introduces through the Allegory of The Cave. Aristotle, in contrast, believes that all people can find truth through merely observing and understanding particular objects.

In conclusion, given Aristotle's empirical nature, it is not surprising that he rejects Plato's Theory of Forms. The notion that reality cannot be found through the perception of particulars in the sensible world certainly draw Aristotle's criticism, especially considering that such a theory could not be substantiated. That all particulars (substances) were dependent on universal concepts (Forms) Aristotle quickly deemed as mystical conjecture. Instead, Aristotle maintains that reality is based on particulars, on individual substances, which share universal commonalities. Aristotle places understanding and knowledge as objects that can be attained through our empirical observations of the physical realm. Ultimately, he offers a systematic ontology than can be substantiated with physical evidence, with particulars.

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