



Raphael's Plato and Aristotle

THE MISFORTUNES OF PHILOSOPHY IN ANTIQUITY

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With the speculations of the pre-Socratic philosophers, with the dialogues of Plato, and with the treatises of Aristotle, philosophy got off to a good start in three respects.

(1) The Greek philosophers managed to pose, and to pose quite clearly, many of the fundamental questions of philosophy. The fecundity of the Platonic dialogues lies in this: they raise so many of

the basic questions—questions about the nature of things, about being and becoming, about the one and the many, about matter and spirit, about the divine, about the intellect, about ideas, about virtue and the virtues, about justice and happiness, about the state and the individual.

Neither the refinement of these questions in later periods of thought nor the later addition of questions that open up new lines of philosophical inquiry should be allowed to diminish the magnificence of the Platonic achievement, which richly deserves the tribute paid by Alfred North Whitehead when he said that the whole of European thought can be read as a series of footnotes to the dialogues of Plato.

(2) The Greek philosophers—here Plato to a lesser extent, and to a much greater extent Aristotle—also managed to lay down the lines of correct procedure in many of the respects that are essential to the proper conduct of the philosophical enterprise. The way in which Aristotle carefully considers the questions raised by his predecessors or contemporaries, and takes their opinions into account, is an amazingly clear first approximation to what is meant by the conduct of philosophy as a public, rather than a private enterprise.

Consider these two statements by Aristotle, which eloquently express his sense of philosophy as a cooperative enterprise. The first is from the *Metaphysics*, Book II, Chapter 1:

The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, we do not collectively fail, but every one says something true about the nature of things, and while individually we contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed.

The second is from *On the Soul*, Book I, Chapter 2:

...it is necessary...to call into council the views of those of our predecessors...in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their suggestions and avoid their errors.

Pondering these statements, it is difficult not to attribute to Aristotle a conception of philosophical knowledge as testable *doxa*. If he had regarded philosophical knowledge as episteme, he would hardly have recommended, as he does in these statements, a type

of procedure that befits sifting opinions and testing them for their relative truth. If philosophical truths consisted of self-evident principles and rigorously demonstrated conclusions, one would not proceed in this way. [1]

In addition, Aristotle is an empirical philosopher in the proper sense of that term; namely, a philosopher who submits theories and conclusions—his own and others—to the empirical test, by appeal to the common experience of humankind.

(3) The Greek philosophers—here both Plato and Aristotle, though in quite different ways—managed to detect and expose a large number of typical fallacies, paradoxes, and puzzles that result from linguistic or logical inadequacies, imprecisions, or confusions in the discourse that is generated by philosophical problems.

What I am saying here is that Plato and Aristotle initiated philosophy, not only on the place of first-order questions, both speculative and normative, but also on the plane of second-order questions about human thought and speech, especially when these are concerned with difficult first-order questions in philosophy. To the major contributions previously mentioned, they added a third—an amazingly rich beginning of what is now called analytic and linguistic philosophy—a contribution that, by the way, the more learned of contemporary analysts properly acknowledge.

These three contributions can be recognized and given their due praise without regard to the substantive truth or error in the philosophical positions taken by Plato and Aristotle on particular problems. When we take all three into account, it is hard to see how philosophy could have had a more auspicious beginning. Nevertheless, the circumstances under which philosophy was born and went through its first state of development were not wholly auspicious. I have three misfortunes in mind.

First and most important of all, there was in antiquity no clear line between philosophy, on the one hand, and either science or religion, on the other. The ancients did not clearly and explicitly separate questions that cannot be answered *without* investigation from questions that cannot possibly be answered *by* investigation. As a consequence of this, Aristotle treated, as if they were properly philosophical questions, questions that can be properly answered only by investigative science—questions about the nature and motions of the heavenly bodies; questions about the nature, number, and operation of the human senses; questions about the elementary

forms of matter; questions about the species of living things, their order, relation, and origin.

Many of the treatises of Aristotle show him dealing with what we now know to be philosophical questions, on the one hand, and scientific questions, on the other; but he treats them as if they were all philosophical questions. A great many of the errors with which Aristotle is charged were made in his effort to answer scientific questions without being aware that they require a different method from the one he employed in answering questions that are genuinely philosophical.

This is not to say that he failed to resort to investigation in certain fields, especially biology. We know that he was an investigative scientist as well as a reflective philosopher; but *he* did not know it. He did not separate—and, in his day, probably could not have separated—these two modes of inquiry in which he engaged, as we, looking back at him, can retrospectively separate his efforts at scientific inquiry from his lines of philosophical thought.

This, then, is one of the misfortunes of philosophy in antiquity: by virtue of the inchoate togetherness of science and philosophy, philosophy took upon itself a burden that it could not discharge—the burden of answering questions that did not properly belong in its domain. We can see the particular sciences—such as physics, astronomy, chemistry, physiology, and zoology—in the womb of ancient philosophy.

Philosophy is, historically, their mother; but they have not yet broken away from her and established themselves as branches of a separate autonomous discipline, the discipline of investigative science. Until this happens—and it does not begin to happen until the seventeenth century—they constitute a burden and a distraction to philosophy; worse than that, the errors which philosophers make in unwittingly trying to deal with matter that properly belong to science insidiously affect their treatment of matters that are properly their own concern.

What I have just said about science and philosophy in antiquity can also be said about science and religion; they were also inchoately confused. The ancients did not realize that certain questions were of a sort that exceeded the power of human inquiry to answer—questions that could not be answered either by investigation or by reflection on the common experience of humankind. Both Plato and Aristotle tried, as philosophers, to handle such questions—Plato in the *Timaeus*, *Phaedo*, and *Laws*; Aristotle in the eighth

book of the *Physics*, the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics*, and the tenth book of the *Ethics*. Certain matters treated therein are matters beyond the reach of testable *doxa*. If men are ever to possess knowledge of such matters, it must come to them by way of divine revelation and supernatural faith. They cannot acquire it by the exercise of their natural faculties and by recourse to the evidences of experience and the light of unaided reason. [2]

The confusion of philosophy with religion in antiquity has still another unfortunate consequence. Religion, as we have seen, is more than a type of knowledge; it is a group of institutions, a set of ceremonial or ritualistic practices, and a code of observances and performances having a sacerdotal or sacramental character. When these things are taken together, they comprise what we understand by "a way of life." When we speak of religion as a way of life, we think of it as enrolling the individual in a community who share certain beliefs, engage in certain ceremonials or rituals, and practice certain obligatory observances. A religious way of life can, of course, be lived anchoritically as well as communally, but it still involves more than beliefs; it involves observances and actions of a sacerdotal or sacramental character, observances and actions that have as their goal a spiritual transformation of some sort. Whatever the nature of the goal, one thing is clear: the goal of the religious way of life is not simply more knowledge of the type which the religious already has.

This last point confirms what should be otherwise clear—namely, that such disciplines as scientific investigation and historical research, as we understand them today, are not, strictly speaking, ways of life in the sense in which religion is. Scientists and historians may belong to learned societies; they may have codes of professional behavior; they may engage in certain practices; but all these, taken together, have only one end in view, and that is the advancement of knowledge, knowledge of exactly the same type that they already possess to some extent.

What has just been said about science and history must be said with equal force about philosophy when we understand it as a comparable branch of knowledge and mode of inquiry. Whatever the rules for the conduct of philosophy as an intellectual enterprise, and whatever code of professional behavior philosophers should subscribe to, these, as in the case of science and history, have only one aim—the advancement of knowledge, the same type of knowledge that philosophers already possess to some degree. Philosophy is, therefore, no more a way of life than science or history. [3]

Both Plato and Aristotle were bewitched by the conception of philosophy as *episteme*—as something much more certain and incorrigible than opinion because it is grounded in incontestable, self-evident axioms or first principles, and proceeds therefrom to demonstrate its conclusions. Both Plato and Aristotle drew a sharp line between knowledge and opinion (*nous* and *episteme*, on the one hand, and *doxa*, on the other), and they both placed mathematics and philosophy on the knowledge side of the line. This misfortune, at the very beginning of philosophy's history, plagues it throughout its history, not only in antiquity, but also in the Middle Ages and in modern times.

The subsequent history of philosophical thought was grievously influenced by the exaltation and idealization of knowledge (*nous* and *episteme*) over the best that can be achieved in the realm of opinion (*doxa*). Later philosophers, whether they agreed or disagreed with the substance of Platonic or Aristotelian teaching, adopted the idea of *nous* and *episteme* as one to be aimed at in philosophical work. Some of them went much further and did what Plato and Aristotle refrained from doing; they expounded their own philosophical thought in a form and with a structure that made it look as if it conformed to the ideal.

If subsequent ages had paid more attention to the actual sifting of philosophical opinions that goes on in the dialogues of Plato, and had recognized that the *Posterior Analytics* does not describe the structure or movement of philosophical thought as it occurs in all the major treatises of Aristotle, philosophy might have been saved many centuries of misdirection in the fruitless effort to conform itself to an appropriate model.

The third misfortune that befell philosophy in antiquity is closely connected with the second. It is the baleful influence of mathematics, mainly in the form of geometry.


Geometry provided the ancients with what they took to be the model of a deductive system. When Plato and Aristotle want to exemplify what they mean by *episteme*, they usually offer the demonstration of geometrical theorems. Again it must be said in defense of Plato and Aristotle that they never made the mistake of Spinoza and other moderns, who actually try to expound a philosophical theory *in ordine geometrico*. Yet we cannot overlook the frequency with which they point to geometry as an actually developed body of knowledge that approximates their ideal better than any other and which, therefore, serves as a model to be imitated.

The bewitchment of philosophy by mathematics—not only geometrical demonstration, but also by the analytical character of mathematical thought—is a much more serious illness of philosophy in modern times than it was in antiquity. Nevertheless, the first signs of that illness can be found in antiquity, not only in connection with the illusions about *episteme*, but also in the extensive use that Plato makes of geometrical figures and of numbers as exemplary forms.

Notes:

1. In the history of Western thought, the word "knowledge" is used in two senses, one of which states an ideal that is not realized in any of the recognized branches of knowledge... In this idealized sense, knowledge consists of truths known beyond the shadow of a doubt, incorrigible and immutable truths involving self-evident propositions and conclusions that can be validly deduced from them. The Greek word for knowledge in this idealized sense was *episteme*... The Greek word for knowledge in a moderate sense was *doxa*, which consists of well-founded opinion, based on evidence and reason—opinion that is testable, falsifiable, and corrigible.

2. The line separating the domain of philosophy from the domain of dogmatic theology and revealed religion was clearly drawn only toward the end of the Christian Middle Ages. Some of the speculations of Plato and Aristotle about theological matters lie athwart the line that separates metaphysical theology (which is a part of philosophy) from dogmatic theology (which belongs to revealed religion).

3. A simple test can be applied. A truly religious person deplors his own moral failings and tries to rectify them in order to bring his character and conduct more into accord with the precepts and practices of his religion. But a scientist, historical scholar, and philosopher may each recognize that he has certain moral deficiencies without any sense of need to overcome them for the sake of serving better the objectives of scientific research, historical scholarship, or philosophical thought. This is one way of seeing that religion is a way of life and that science, history, and philosophy are not. 

Excerpted from his book, *The Four Dimensions of Philosophy*.

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