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## THE MISFORTUNES OF PHILOSOPHY IN ANTIQUITY

**Mortimer Adler**

**W**ith 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 knowledge and truth, about language, about the senses and the intellect, about ideas, about virtue and the virtues, about justice and happiness, about the state and the individual. These questions, at the very beginning of philosophy's career, indicated its scope and character as a first-order discipline, both speculative and practical.

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 I:

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 everyone 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 our predecessors, in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their thought 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 regarded philosophical knowledge as *episteme*, he would hardly recommend, as he does in the above 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 those of others—to the empirical test, by appeal to the common experience of mankind. Moreover, he employs the empirical test as primary; and only secondarily resorts to the logical test and the “is-ought” test in judging the relative soundness of competing philosophical views that have not been falsified by common experience.

(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 plane 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 which, by the way, the more learned of contemporary analysts properly acknowledge.

1 However, see what is said on this point below, pp. 247-249.

These three contributions can be recognized and given their due need of praise without any 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.

( I )

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 exhibit him as dealing with what we now know to be philosophical questions, on the one hand, and what we now recognize to be scientific questions, on the other; but he deals with them as if they were all philosophical questions. A great many of the errors with which Aristotle is charged are errors that he 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 in 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, 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 and 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 matters that properly belong to science insidiously affect their treatment of matters which 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 powers of all human inquiry to answer—questions that could not be answered either by investigation or by reflection on the common experience of mankind. Both Plato and Aristotle tried, as philosophers, to handle such questions—Plato in the *Timaeus*, in the *Phaedo*, and in the *Laws*, Aristotle in the eighth book of the *Physics*, the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics*, and the tenth book of the *Ethics*. Certain of the matters therein treated 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 per-

formances having a sacerdotal or sacramental character.<sup>3</sup> When these things are taken together, they constitute 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 of men 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 that goal, one thing is clear: the goal of the religious way of life is not simply more knowledge of the type which the religious person already has.

2 As we shall see in Chapter 15, 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 which separates natural theology (which is a part of philosophy) from dogmatic theology (which belongs to revealed religion).

3 See above, Chapter 6. pp. 97-99. It was pointed out there that if religious beliefs are not derived from divine revelation and are not held by supernatural faith, they do not have the character of a special type of knowledge.

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 which 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 a comparable mode of inquiry. Whatever rules there are 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 in some degree.

Philosophy is, therefore, no more a way of life than science or history.<sup>4</sup> The fact that normative philosophy consists of ought-statements, rules or prescriptions for the conduct of life and the

management of society, does not alter the case one bit. These are not rules or prescriptions for philosophers or aspirants to follow in order to lead a philosophical way of life; they are rules or prescriptions for all men to follow in order to lead a good human life. Even if it is true, as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle seemed to think, that the good life for man involves a certain amount of philosophizing, it does not follow that philosophy is a way of life.

I have tried to make this clear in order to call attention to the fact that, in the ancient world, philosophy was sometimes mistaken as a way of life. The most obvious example of this is the Pythagorean cult which combined ceremonies, rituals, and observances with a certain line of philosophical speculation about the primary reality of numbers or mathematical forms. Another example is to be found in the dialogues of Plato, wherein Socrates, with Plato's approval, preaches an almost Christian asceticism, not only as prerequisite to philosophizing itself, but also as a philosophical way of life aiming at not just knowledge, but at the elevation or transformation of the soul.<sup>5</sup> My point is, in short, that in a culture which enrolled the less sophisticated in the beliefs and practices of the popular Olympian religion or in those of less populous cults, such as the Orphic or Eleusinian mysteries, philosophy tended to set itself up in competition with religion as a way of life better suited to men of learning and sophistication.

4 A simple test can be applied. A truly religious man deplores 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, a historical scholar, and a 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.

5 See, for example, the *Phaedo*, 64-70.

( 2 )

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. They both 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.

It may be said in Plato's defense that there are passages in which he seems to say that only God has knowledge or wisdom (in the sense of *episteme*), and that man seldom, if ever, rises above the plane of opinion. We know that Plato regarded all physical or cosmological speculations as, at best, "likely stories"; and a careful reader of the dialogues is compelled to admit that they never present a single doctrine in the form it should have if its truths had the character of knowledge (*nous* and *episteme*) rather than that of debatable opinion (*doxa*).

It may also be said in defense of Aristotle that, though his exposition in the *Posterior Analytics* of the structure of knowledge (*nous* and *episteme*) as distinct from arguable opinion (*doxa*) as that is treated in the *Topics* suggests that mathematics and philosophy or science are knowledge rather than opinion, his own philosophical treatises at their very best do not exhibit this structure at all. The conclusions which Aristotle presents in his *Physics* and his *Metaphysics*, his *Ethics* and his *Politics*, are offered as defensible, reasonable, and tested opinions (*doxa*), not as conclusions rigorously demonstrated from self-evident principles. Nowhere in the treatises of Aristotle can we find a body of knowledge that conforms to the requirements set forth in the *Posterior Analytics*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Plato, *Meno*, 97-99; *Republic*, Book VI, 509b-513d; and Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, Book I, Chapters 2-11, 19-22, 32-33, Book II, Chapter 19; also *Ethics*, Book VI, Chapters 3, 6, and 7.

<sup>7</sup> I am concerned here only with Aristotle's work as a first-order philosopher. His *Prior Analytics* (which is second-order work) contains an informal axiomatization of syllogistic. See William C. and Martha Kneale, *The Development of Logic*, Oxford, 1962, pp. 78-79; and I. M. Bochenski, *History of Formal Logic*, South Bend, 1959, p. 72 ff.


Nevertheless, the subsequent history of philosophical thought was grievously influenced by the exaltation and idealization of knowledge (*nous* and *episteme*) as over against 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 ideal 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 inappropriate model.

( 3 )

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 which 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 by 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. 

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