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NOTES ON THE METHODS OF INQUIRY OF PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

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WHAT DO WE MEAN by Platonic and Aristotelian thinking? Plato’s dialogues and Aristotle’s treatises are sharply contrasting methods of inquiry because the two philosophers differed in at least three significant ways: their attitude toward inquiry, their notion of the nature of the inquiry, and the objective of their dialectic. This essay examines these three important elements as they relate to the philosophies of both men, whose legacy pervades not only how we think but what we think.

Plato’s Attitude Toward Inquiry

It is unlikely that Plato wished to create a finite system to which the dialectic of all philosophers would be restricted. He abhorred rigid language and preferred a wide and familiar range of language and images to explain his ideas. (1)

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His \textit{system}, if he had one, suggested that no one system could exist to provide desired outcomes; rather, his writings imply that the pursuit of truth while engaged in worthwhile endeavors was paramount. In fact, his aversion to a formulaic, inflexible treatment and explanation of philosophical foundations is made plain by the simple fact that he never described a method of inquiry.

This absence of a clearly definable system is especially true in three dialogues: \textit{Protagoras}, \textit{Meno}, and \textit{Gorgias}. In each, Plato poses the questions \textit{What is virtue? Can virtue be taught?} and \textit{What end does oratory wish to achieve?} But Socrates, the main character of each dialogue, never dictates to the reader what position to take. Plato’s dialogues, like most philosophical conversations between two people, are not intended to provide a definitive answer to a universal question. And although Plato recorded his master Socrates’ remarkable dialogues, his intentions have been questioned by some scholars, who believe that he did not expect them to be historical documents. (2)

Indeed, Plato believed that philosophy was not a literary device, and that it was best conveyed in the public arena. Gross (1968) suggests that Plato made a clear distinction between the written and spoken word:

\begin{quote}
Plato appeared to distrust the written word as an adequate way of transmitting philosophic ideas. He claimed that only live speech, where the speaker could be cross-questioned, was the proper vehicle of philosophic thought. (3)
\end{quote}

Perhaps Plato cultivated his dialogic method because he found it to be the only way in which to examine questions about virtue, justice, and beauty; present the viewpoints of the dominant thinkers of his time; and demonstrate the manner in which the debates were conducted.

\textbf{Plato’s Notion of the Nature of Inquiry}

In establishing his dialogic method, Plato wanted to mirror as closely as possible the actual process through which he, his teachers, and his students contemplated philosophy. J.J. Chambliss (1965) points out that the ideal educator has an affinity for the dialectic, which is so prominent in Plato’s works:

\begin{quote}
It is by a method akin to dialectic that a teacher uses words so that students may remind themselves of what is in them to be thought, and, for some, to be known. (4)
\end{quote}

Plato also had to consider the reason for committing the dialogues to paper. In concurring with the suggestion that Plato did not write the dialogues for
posterity, Stokes (1986) theorizes that Plato probably wrote them for presentation purposes, much like a modern dramatist would create dialogue.

Writing may often have been for purposes of check or reminder for oral recitation, rather than for wholly independent use. Plato’s dialogues could very possibly rely on a substantial proportion of Athenians retaining powers of memory superior to our modern norm. Such a public would not need the explicitness of reference … for a constantly and fluently reading, and hence less freely memorizing, one. (5)

Thus, to Plato the dialogue could well have been intended as a fusion of philosophic commentary (in which the problems of man could be considered) and dramatic entertainment (in which such problems are considered before live audiences in a manner resembling live action as it was perceived at that time).

Plato’s Dialectical Objective

A sound approach to understanding Plato’s intentions is through Sallis’s insightful study (1975) which describes three salient features in each of Plato’s dialogues: dramatic character, soul, and playfulness. (6) By dramatic character, Sallis means the dimensionality between what is being said and the context in which it is said. Tejera (1984) calls this Plato’s conceptual experiment:

... a variable but visible format that underlies all the dialogues — different as they are in their individual designs — and that frees the author from the burden of overall doctrinal consistency (from dialogue to dialogue) by holding in a state of dramatic or conversational suspension and putting them in the mouths of likely speakers other than Plato himself. It is a format that exempts attempted solutions to philosophic problems from sounding or having to claim to be definitive. (7)

The dramatic character of the dialogues gives us more to consider than merely the problem discussed or the author’s viewpoint about it. We must also scrutinize each character’s motivation, relationship to each other, and attitude about the issue at hand. Taylor (1926) stresses the importance of being aware of Plato’s self-omission from the dialogues, especially when comparing Plato to his most famous student:

Unlike Aristotle, (Plato) does not introduce himself and his opinions into his dialogues. He is, in fact, at great pains, with the instinct of the great dramatists, to keep his own personality in the background. (8)
By *soul* is meant what the dialogues provoke the listener or reader to recollect. In Plato’s case this is Truth. What distinguishes Plato from the other philosophers of his time is his rejection of opinion. Because of this, Solmsen (in Owen, 1968) reports that Plato places the dialectic as the highest form of communication, in a class of its own and of greater import than other branches of study such as mathematics and science:

The dialectician must be able to “render and receive account of what he knows.” He must find his way — or fight his way — to the end through all scrutiny and must proceed in accordance with reality, not in accordance with opinion. (9)

By *playfulness* is meant the engaging spirit in which philosophy is to be undertaken — a spirit conducive to the interpretation of doctrine. As Guthrie (1956) says, we not only read a philosophical text, but we see it acted. (10)

For Plato, this engaging spirit or dramatic quality “affects not only the artistic setting and the personages, but the ideas which he brings upon the stage. … The Platonic Socrates, under cover of an ironical profession of ignorance, employs a … method to expose showy pretenders to universal knowledge, to produce a salutary conviction of ignorance, or to stimulate youthful thought, and prepare the way for a more serious analysis by an exposition of the antinomies latent in conventional opinion.” (11)

It is this same engaging spirit, however, that creates problems in interpreting Plato’s objectives. Tejera insists that students of philosophy cannot distinguish between Plato’s Socrates and the historical Socrates. (12) Gross suggests that different Platonic dialogues examining similar questions present answers in conflict with one another. (13)

Plato’s method, however, is more about what question is to be asked and how it is to be asked. Plato’s Socrates spends a great deal of time in *Gorgias* trying to lay the groundwork for the deceptively simple question, *what end does the orator seek?* And this process is itself at the heart of Plato’s method. One cannot choose to arbitrarily assign universals to situations occurring in the dialogues. At best we can look at the dialogues as “attempts to formulate ways of asking philosophic questions, in the course of which certain hypotheses are put forth which are then subjected to incisive scrutiny.” (14) In a sense, Plato’s dialogues defy traditional explication because we cannot subject them to a literal interpretation as we can treatises. Tejera insists that a reader seeking to answer philosophic questions through Plato’s characters must prove, among other matters, that the character speaks for Plato, that Plato meant the words literally, and that another character opposed to the proposed answer did not
speak for Plato. (15) To do anything less would be to commit serious interpretive violence to the text.

**Aristotle’s Attitude Toward Inquiry**

The perspective from which we may view Plato cannot provide focus when we examine the works of Aristotle. They are similar, however, in that neither philosopher sought to present a comprehensive system of philosophy. Moravcsik (1967) compares this characteristic of the two philosophers:

*Aristotle is one of those rare philosophers who wrote about an enormous range of topics within the fields of logic, ethics, philosophy of education, philosophy of science, philosophy of art, philosophy of language, epistemology, and metaphysics. But it is a mistake to think that his philosophy adds up either to a system or to a world view within which all answers within all these fields are organized and interrelated. ... In his philosophizing Aristotle seems to have kept in mind the ideal of the self-sufficient man, an ideal that both Plato and he espoused in their ethical writings; a self-sufficient man ought to be able to deal with any problem that he encounters even though he may not organize his answers into an axiomatic pattern, and even though he may come to the conclusion that different types of question require different types of answers. (16)*

But Aristotle differs from Plato in more ways than he resembles him. During the prime of his career, Aristotle saw a more book-oriented society and, therefore, had greater motivation to preserve his work than did his teacher. (17) While it is widely accepted that Aristotle’s treatises are his lecture notes which have been edited and re-edited and translated and re-translated over the past two millennia — which in part accounts for what Barnes (1976) calls a stark and abrupt style that is crammed with uncouth and technical terms — (18) the massive scope of his written work suggests that he intended to lay the groundwork of a dialectical method which consistently aims to reach conclusions, even if these conclusions do not resolutely answer a posed question and cannot be reached the same way for all questions. Thus, with Aristotle we see a more systematic approach to inquiry than we do with Plato. As Hamlyn (1987) muses:

*Plato could never have written the mature works of Aristotle. If nothing else they were treatises, and Plato did not believe in such things. Aristotle clearly did, and what he wrote is a never-ending source of interest and fascination. (19)*
Aristotle’s Notion of the Nature of Inquiry

The study of Aristotle’s philosophy necessarily begins with his criticism of Plato. Solmsen (1968) notes that the nucleus of Aristotle’s paradigm is an attack on Plato’s conception of philosophy:

Aristotle draws a sharp line of separation between the dialecticians and those who impart technical or scientific instruction. It is the latter who start from first, albeit indemonstrable, principles of ‘true’ quality and whose concern is with teaching and education. The men whom Aristotle here has in mind are primarily the mathematicians. Their procedure is clearly more solid and more scientific; by comparison with them the dialecticians begin to look rather dilettantish. (20)

Evans (1977) sees this distinction by Aristotle as one of his greatest achievements and as an entrée into other fields of study:

One of Aristotle’s most important contributions to human thought was the idea that demarcation lines can be drawn between the different departments of expertise and that nothing is thereby lessened in the expertise of each distinct expert. In this his opposition to Plato is fundamental. For Plato believed that to know anything in the fullest sense it is necessary to know everything; he thought that any science or skill which is partial in its scope has only a limited claim to the title not simply of universal science but of science. (21)

Aristotle, therefore, believes that the degree of certainty we reach in our inquiry of different subject matters is a function of the depths and limitations of those subject matters, not of some supreme dialectical method possessed only by the dialectician. This notion considerably influences the adaptive manner in which Aristotle approaches each discipline. Furthermore, it explains why he would prefer a non-dialogic method in his writings, for under investigation are the subject matter and his opinion of it, not the dramatic context or personal conflicts emanating from it.

Aristotle’s Dialectical Objective

Aristotle’s Ethics offers a fine example of his constant effort at classification of all types of knowledge, an effort that does not appear with as much frequency or structure in Plato’s dialogues. Where Plato contemplates ceaselessly on virtue, Aristotle bypasses such agonizing determinations by classifying virtue into two types: moral and intellectual. He then further categorizes the intellect, or the rational part of the soul, into two parts: the contemplative, which
considers invariable things, and the calculative, which considers variable things. To define the virtue of each, Aristotle does not seek a universal equation because each virtue is directly linked to its proper function. (22) While he does not lead us directly to a truth regarding virtue, he does tell us the five ways in which the truth can be reached through the intellect by means of affirmation or denial: via art, science, prudence, wisdom, and intuition. (23)

In underscoring the difference between the two philosophers, Evans (1977) argues:

Aristotle is concerned to show that (a) the activity of the dialectician does not amount to philosophy, despite the dialectician’s belief to the contrary, ... (b) what the dialectician is concerned with does form part of the philosopher’s concern. Both (a) and (b) are necessary elements in Aristotle’s defence of his conception of the universal study of Being against the main alternative contender for this title, Plato’s conception of dialectic as the super-science. (a) is in effect the statement of Aristotle’s opposition to the alternative position, but (b) is necessary to preclude the charge that Aristotle has ignored what is valuable in his opponents’ account and simply set up an alternative of his own which may have as much, but not necessarily any more, than the opposing account to recommend it. (24)

While both Plato and Aristotle seek Truth, Aristotle submits that the means to Truth are through the many disciplines, each of them with a force of its own and with a significance neither subordinate nor superior to its counterpart fields of study.

REFERENCES


12. Tejera, p.29.


15. Tejera, p.4.


17. Stokes, p.442.


19. Hamlyn, p.76.


23. Ibid., p.206.