

Chapter 1 Questions of Philosophy

Section 5 Attempts at Universal Knowledge 1

16 Sophists and Socrates

* The Sophists were the first to criticize metaphysics in philosophical thinking. Protagoras, Gorgias and Prodicus were a new type of intellectual who educated themselves on the Eleatic arguments of about “language.” They rejected the conventional claims about the *origin of the world* and *universal knowledge*. In this sense, the central motive of the philosophers known as Sophists was undoubtedly to oppose and criticize metaphysical dogmatism in philosophy. However, in Plato's dialogues, the Sophists are depicted as typical skeptics and relativists who deny the legitimacy of authority and authorized knowledge. They teach, in Plato's works, rhetoric only as a tool for persuasion, instead of dialectic for the pursuit of truth, contending that genuine knowledge does not exist (See *Timaeus*, *Parmenides*, *Sophistes*, etc.)

Meanwhile, Plato portrayed Socrates as a sincere explorer of the human psyche, who criticized the moral decline of Athenian citizens for abandoning their traditional ethical principles. At the same time, Socrates was described as criticizing the Sophists as an example of the decline of philosophical epistemology.

* Nietzsche harshly criticized Socrates as a new rationalist in Greek philosophy. For Nietzsche Socrates was a philosopher who embraced the belief that *truth* could be secured through authentic knowledge, and also the first person to stake his life on truth and justice. In other words, Nietzsche delivered scathing remarks about Socrates as a historical precursor to Immanuel Kant, who is known for his ethical rigorism. (See *the Birth of Tragedy*)

Socrates was indeed reputed to be a fighter against the moral decline of the Greek citizens of his time. However, Nietzsche believed that philosophers (moralists) who condemn decadence are actually examples of degeneration (See *Twilight of the Idols*). Nietzsche also criticized Socrates' method of dialogues, viewing them as *intellectual optimism* reflecting the belief that the rational pursuit of truth would eventually lead to its discovery. Of course, this image of Socrates mainly stems from Plato's depiction of him in the *Dialogues*. A slightly different image of Socrates is provided by Xenophon, for example.

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Indeed, in contrast to others he set his face against all discussion of such high matters as the nature of the Universe; how the "kosmos," as the savants phrase it, came into being; or by what forces the celestial phenomena arise. To trouble one's brain about such matters was, he argued, to play the fool. He would ask first: Did these investigators feel their knowledge of things human so complete that they betook themselves to these lofty speculations? Or did they maintain that they were playing their proper parts in thus neglecting the affairs of man to speculate on the concerns of God? He was astonished they did not see how far these problems lay beyond mortal ken. (Xenophone Book I-1)

Xenophon's portrayal of Socrates is similar to the image of Buddha in that Socrates dismissed the metaphysical thinking as living in an intellectual structure and encouraged restoring the habit of caring for what is truly needed in life. Socrates distanced himself from questions such as “What is the world?” What is the unique ultimate cause?” and What is eternity?.” Instead, he tirelessly asked the questions pertaining to people's actual lives: What does reverence for the gods mean? What is beauty? What are justice and injustice? What is madness? What is valor? What is the state? Who is a statesman? In Xenophon's work, Socrates was a distinguished man who was not controlled by greed and lust. He could calmly endure not only cold and heat, but all other hardships including

uphill battles. Moreover, he walked the path of the *Virtuous Mean* through his deep care for soul.

* In Nietzsche's view, Socrates was an ascetic priest who cured people of spiritual decay through morality and the care of soul. However, Xenophon's portrayal of Socrates highlights his historical significance of his presence in the ancient Greek world. In Xenophon's account, Socrates appears as one of those religious gurus, alongside figures like Confucius, Jesus Christ and Buddha. They are historical sages who strove to dismantle the sacred ethics held by their communities, which had already been undermined in the course of history. They then attempted to transform such communal ethics into individuals' internal inquiries to reorganize them as wisdom for better living.

* Unlike this, in Plato's dialogues, Socrates presents himself as a thinker who opened up a new horizon for philosophy. Here, Socrates is the most skilled practitioner of dialectic, a method of dialogue, and the originator of a new way of thinking. This method relativizes common views to explore the meanings and truths of practical acts and matters in human life.

According to Bertrand Russell, Socrates did not invent his method of dialogue; it originated with Zeno, a pupil of Parmenides. Russell derived this supposition from one of Plato's dialogues *Parmenides*. However, Zeno's linguistic dialectic emphasizes the acknowledged nature of the *reductio ad absurdum*, which is characteristic of human discourse with language. It is not intended to access the *truth*. Nevertheless, it is difficult to distinguish Socrates' dialogues from the arguments of Sophists, just as Socrates was depicted as a Sophist in Aristophanes' comedies.

* Socrates' thought is often referred to as ironic because in earlier dialogues such as *Meno* and *Lysis*, his questions made people doubt the plausibility of their mundane knowledge and beliefs, which they eventually found to be false. He never gave them the answers to his questions. Plato's intent is unequivocal: he wanted to depict Socrates as a philosopher who knew the answer to the question, namely the truth, but kept it to himself without revealing it to anybody. Whereas the Sophists had little conviction about human affairs and souls, Socrates held a firm belief in the truth. This distinction sets Socrates apart from the Sophists.

* What Plato inherited from Socrates was a unique philosophical method of attaining universal knowledge while overcoming linguistic puzzles suggested by Zeno and Gorgias. This fundamental epistemological approach would later be encapsulated in the radical term "Idea." Along with the philosophy of Aristotle, it would be a final milestone in the development of world theory in Greek philosophy.

* Plato and Aristotle were the first conscious universal epistemologists in Greek philosophy. Their pursuit of universal knowledge was fueled by their struggles with the Sophists' relativistic, *reductio-ad-absurdum* arguments. In Plato's later dialogues, Socrates developed a method to distinguish "episteme" (true knowledge) from numerous "doxa" (common beliefs or popular opinions). Aristotle adopted Plato's belief in episteme and thoroughly reorganized it using his own method to create a new scientific system of episteme.

Let us begin with Aristotle in reverse historical order.

17 Aristotle

* The basic scheme of Aristotle's universal epistemology:

He meticulously studied the overall views and theories about the universe and Being provided by earlier Greek philosophers. He integrated and governed these views, carefully searching for the foundation of all episteme. He examined all the philosophical struggles for truth in Greek philosophy, establishing himself an intellect who is bound to serve as the final judge.

* Let us briefly summarize the outcomes of the philosophical thinking achieved by the pre-Aristotelian Greek philosophers.

- (1) Thought about the genesis principle of Being, e.g., four elements including water and fire.
- (2) Two elements of the genesis principle: matter versus form (e.g., water versus number)
- (3) Abstract thought about Being itself and the thought about the cause of changes. Being vs. Becoming
- (4) Thought about the grounds for knowledge: sensational versus super-sensational.
- (5) Riddles of language and knowledge arising from those opposing theories
- (6) Master Plato's "Idea" theory as an epistemological conclusion about all the existing entities.

* Plato and Aristotle were firmly convinced that the rhetorical games spreading among contemporary Greek philosophers, as well as their loss of confidence in knowledge and knowability, could be *completely overcome*. Plato credited himself with an entirely new concept of "cause" that could subvert conventional ideas of causes and principles. What about Aristotle? While reviewing and synthesizing all the doctrines and theories developed thus far, he was inevitably led to the unique concept of the totality of Being (the universe) and its ultimate cause. He speculated in his important work *Metaphysics* that the universality of knowledge could be achieved by this schema of totality.

* Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, however, is marred by a significant confusion in its attempt to provide a systematic overview of Greek philosophy. Although the key topics are evidently the definitions of "Being" (*on*), "substance" (*ousia*) and the root cause, Aristotle's description is quite incoherent. He says one thing here and another there, as Russell pointed out. Even Hegel, who highly regarded Aristotle, complains:

... no one is more comprehensive and speculative than he. [...] But a general view of his philosophy does not give us the impression of its being in construction a self-systematized whole, of which the order and connection pertain likewise to the Notion; for the parts are empirically selected and placed together ... (Hegel 1894 p.118)

In fact, his inconsistent definitions of concepts such as Being, substance and essence have led to countless interpretations of Aristotelian philosophy. The ambiguity of the concept of Being likely became the source of the esoteric ontologies of Thomas Aquinas and Martin Heidegger.

* In order to overcome the confusion created by the puzzles of knowledge and language, Aristotle begins by attempting to ban the rhetorical games of the Sophists. Since the essence of philosophy lies in the pursuit of the *most fundamental* entity, –Being– itself, one must prohibit the false use of language that hinders the serious endeavor of philosophy. Thus, the law of contradiction is established, and the notion of definition is defined. However, the rules of the alleged correct use of language have never been successfully validated throughout the history of philosophy. Logical laws for philosophical statements, including those of contradiction and the excluded middle, definitions, and methods of accounting, are impotent against philosophical dogmatism and relativism by nature. These rules are only valid for the language game of precise logicism, which presupposes that true and false are determinable. They make no sense to relativists, who do not share this presupposition. In the early twentieth century, the laws of logicism were introduced again as logical positivism by philosophers who reacted against the most arcane, metaphysical language of nineteenth-century German idealism. However, it was proven to be useless for the same reason as Aristotle's logic.

* Aristotle wrote twenty-three criticisms of the Idea theory in his *Metaphysics*. One well-known example states that, since there are as many Ideas as there are matters and events, the number of Ideas must be infinite. Most of Aristotle's critiques of the Idea theory can be found in Plato's own work *Parmenides* in the form of criticism from this philosopher. Additionally, Aristotle raised the

important objection that the *principle* called Idea cannot be the *cause* of concrete entities, i.e., neither the cause of movement nor the substance of other entities.

Above all one might discuss the question what on earth the Forms contribute to sensible things, either to those that are eternal or to those that come into being and cease to be. For they cause neither movement nor any change in them. But again they help in no wise either towards the knowledge of the other things (for they are not even the substance of these, else they would have been in them), or towards their being, if they are not in the particulars which share in them; though if they were, they might be thought to be causes, as white causes whiteness in a white object by entering into its composition. (Aristotle *Metaphysics* Book 1 Part 9)

According to Aristotle, the root causes of all things and matters fall into one of four categories: material, formal, moving and final. Plato proposed the “Idea” as the root cause or fundamental ground of all existing entities. However, his account could not adequately reveal the significance of root cause. The Idea is not a material, moving, or final cause. Aristotle categorized the modes of existing entities as *dynamis* (potentiality) and *energeia* (actuality). For him, the Idea has no *energeia* superior to any other mode of being. Plato merely referred to the nominal essence of things and matters as “Ideas” and attributed substance to them. Aristotle criticized this as a mere turn of phrase.

* The crux of Aristotle's criticism of the Idea theory lies in his attempt to reframe philosophical thought, which tends to view Ideas as the absolute essence of all the entities existing high above the world, and return them to a mundane, earthly view of the world. In other words, Plato's Idea theory is a typical archaic worldview in which reality and ideas are reversed, especially from our current *naturalistic* viewpoint. In contrast, Aristotle's critique of the theory of Idea seems to be a sound way of thinking that complies with common sense. Russell declares, “Aristotle's metaphysics, roughly speaking, may be described as Plato diluted by common sense.” (Russell 1945 p.175)

* The definitions of major concepts in *Metaphysics*:

(1) Four ways to account for "What are substances?":

1. Essence, or what it is to be a thing 2. The universal concept 3. The genus and 4. Hypokeimenon, or the substratum

(2) Four causes: 1. Material 2. Formal 3. Moving 4. Final

(3) Four modes of changes: 1. Generation and destruction 2. Change of quality 3. Increase and decrease 4. Change of place

(4) Two principles of beings: one is potentiality (*dynamis*) and the other is actuality (*energeia*)

(5) Three causes of human beings: 1. Constituents (mind and matter) 2. Father (external cause) 3. Sun (internal cause)

(6) Three kinds of substances: 1. Evanescent and sensational (Things) 2. Eternal and sensational (Universe) 3. Eternal and immortal (God)

This specification resembles the meticulous accounts found in Indian philosophy, but unlike the latter, it shows little inclination toward fictitious allegories and narratives. It is an extraordinarily comprehensive and precise categorization that aligns with our common-sense world views. It systematically organizes and classifies all entities in the world, developing the notion of “causes” into more significant and fundamental ideas through rational inferences. Thus, Aristotle established a general and universal principle that exists at a “meta-level” beyond any existing divisions and classifications.

* In order to grasp the significance of Aristotle's accomplishments, we must consider Hegel's appraisal for a very good reason. The fundamental method that Aristotle adopted to overcome the puzzle of knowledge in Greece closely aligns with Hegel's solutions to modern philosophical problems. Indeed, Aristotle's overview and systematization of ancient Greek philosophy resemble Hegel's approach to modern philosophy. According to Hegel, at the core of Aristotle's philosophy is

the profound insight that philosophical thinking is the thought of thought.

Thus in Plato and Aristotle the result was the Idea; yet we saw in Plato the universal made the principle in a somewhat abstract way as the unmoved Idea; in Aristotle, on the other hand, thought in activity became absolutely concrete as the thought which thinks itself. The next essential, on which now is immediately before us, must be contained in that into which Philosophy under Plato and Aristotle had formed itself. This necessity is none other than the fact that the universal must now be proclaimed free from itself as the universality of the principle, so that the particular may be recognized through this universal. (Hegel 1894 p.228)

As this speculative Idea, which is the best and most free, is also to be seen in nature, and not only in thinking reason, Aristotle (Metaph. XII. 8) in this connection passes on to the visible God, which is the heavens. God, as living God, is the universe; and thus in the universe God, as living God, shows Himself forth. He comes forth as manifesting Himself or as causing motion, and it is in manifestation alone that the difference between the cause of motion and that which is moved comes to pass. (ibid. p.152)

Hegel considered it crucial that while Aristotle began with the study of *ousia* (substances that genuinely exist) and their general classification, categorization and enumeration of their causes, he ultimately arrived at the idea of the ultimate substance: God.

18 Foundation of Metaphysics

* Let us consider this from a viewpoint different from Hegel's.

The primary pursuit of substances or of their causes as *hyle* (matter) and *eidos* (form), that is, the effort for knowing of the principles of substantial entities, is generally futile because they are constantly moving and changing. Sensations can never capture the totality of worldly changes. In other words, sensation cannot accurately perceive entities in terms of temporality. Sensuous perception apprehends an arrow as a figurative substance (matter and form), but cannot grasp the motion of a flying arrow. This is what Zeno's paradoxes point to. Upon learning this, the human intellect naturally tends to think of another cause: the *causa movens*, or cause of motion, which cannot be perceived by the senses.

The inability to understand things, their origins and their changes as they can only be solved philosophically by introducing the concept of time (change). Attaining the ultimate cause of becoming and changes ensures pertinent knowledge, providing a vantage point from which the totality of things and matters can be seen.

* Whatever term ontological thinkers use to express *causa movens* – centrifugal and centripetal movements, love and hatred, *nous*, etc.– they are, after all, a *summary* of sensations caused by the movement of consciousness. What we call *power* is merely a concept molded by this movement of consciousness. The same applies to different spiritual phenomena, though their structures are much more complicated. According to Hegel, consciousness grasps the truth of objects and matters through its own movement of negation and synthesis. This movement is defined, on the one hand, by his dialectical notion of particularity – universality –individuality, and on the other hand, by the way knowledge serially unfolds from fact to essence to concept to idea. However, humans are unable to perpetually develop this movement as individual spirits. Hegel thus proposes the idea of the Absolute Spirit as the ultimate terminus of this infinite movement. Through the Absolute Spirit, we gain insights into the essence of matters, evolve the universe of meaning and value, and maintain the insights as concepts.

* According to Hegel, the puzzles and paradoxes of knowledge in Greek philosophy should be solved by thoroughly examining the discrepancy between sensations and temporality ad quem using

the method of dialectics. In his view, Aristotle most closely approached Hegel's system of philosophy by providing the most comprehensive summary of the puzzles of knowledge in Greek philosophy. Aristotle's ideas of the "causa movens" and the absolute cause largely align with Hegel's account of the agreement between Being and Knowing, or between object and subject (thought).

* The most simplified version of Aristotle's inference is that there are two types of substances. One is the concrete, physical thing (the particular), which incessantly becomes, changes and disappears. The other is the unmoved, eternal universe. There is an incontestable fact of genesis and termination on the one hand, and there is an eternal existence on the other hand. There must be a *prima causa* (prime cause) that brings the two substances into *energeia* (actuality). A Japanese translator Takashi Ide summed up the content of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book XII, Part 7 as follows:

The prime, eternal mover, which initiates eternal movement, is itself never subject to change and motion as it is an utter *energeia*. It moves others while remaining unmoved, much like how an object of thought or desire moves a thinker or a desirer, or how a lover moves the beloved. The entire universe depends on this prime unmoved mover. This is goodness, life and a pure reason that perpetually thinks and contemplates itself. It is God. His life of contemplation is perfect and delightful.

To understand Aristotle's metaphysics, it is essential to grasp two concepts, the substratum of "becoming" and "changes," and the "true cause" (supreme entity) that governs multiple causes. For Aristotle, and Hegel too, successfully exploring the root causes of all worldly entities and their genesis would clear up the puzzles of knowledge and language that ontological philosophers have struggled with the most.

* Incidentally, whereas Hegel was well aware that solving the riddle of knowledge is difficult without addressing the issue of temporality (dialectic is an epistemological method developed around the concept of temporality), Aristotle was unaware of this problem. As has been suggested, the question of *temporal ontology* lies at the heart of the riddle of knowledge throughout the history of European philosophy. Regarding this matter, Aristotle offered a mere naturalistic, if not mediocre, interpretation. He maintained that time is the number of movements divided between before and after "now"; movement is the number countable by humans, with the number "one" being counted and changing one after another.¹ The basic categories for representing time are movement and number, which are tacitly posited as objective entities.

¹ "On the other hand, when we do perceive a 'before' and an 'after', then we say that there is time. For time is just this-number of motion in respect of 'before' and 'after'. Hence time is not movement, but only movement in so far as it admits of enumeration. A proof of this: we discriminate the more or the less by number, but more or less movement by time. Time then is a kind of number. (Number, we must note, is used in two senses-both of what is counted or the countable and also of that with which we count. Time obviously is what is counted, not that with which we count.)" (Aristotle *Physics* Book IV Part 11)