

Aristotle as an Idealist

GLENN G. PAJARES

g_pajares@yahoo.com

University of San Jose-Recoletos
Cebu City, Philippines

Abstract - The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle is widely known as a realist in believing that the real exists in the sensible world and can be known through sense of perception or observation. But, there are others who would claim that he is a moderate realist in believing that the essences are one with physical objects but are known universally and immaterially. Contrary to these popular beliefs, this paper discussed that Aristotle is neither a realist nor a moderate realist but an idealist. The study utilized descriptive critical analysis as its method. The author explained the basic principles and teachings of Aristotle on metaphysics, epistemology and dwelt on these basic principles and teachings as bases of criticism. This article presented Aristotle's belief that the true essences of things which he referred to as forms, essences or substance are metaphysical or universal which is beyond the physical and therefore beyond the grasp of sensation and observation. In other words, reality for him is only logical or mental in nature for it is not tangible. This also explained that Aristotle's theory of knowledge (epistemology) which employed the senses to grasp the essences of things is not possible.

Keywords - realism, idealism, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, hylemorphism, essence, form, substance and nature.

INTRODUCTION

In the painting of Rafael “the School of Athens” one finds Plato walking side by side with his student Aristotle. The former was pointing up while the latter is pointing down. These gestures indicate the difference of their thoughts. Plato was pointing up because he believed that reality is in the world of ideas—a supersensible world found outside the material universe. The world we are living according to him is not real but merely a copy of the World of Ideas. The Ideas also known as Forms are the real entities that serve as prototypes of all the things in the sensible world. In contrast, it is a common belief that Aristotle was pointing down because he believes that reality is this world and not in the world which his teacher proposes. The real world is the sensible world that can be perceived by sense and experience (Soccio, 2007, 171-172).

However, the author of this article would like to explain that Aristotle does not really consider reality as one with the sensible world as what most scholars and readers believe. The author would like to elucidate that Aristotle is an idealist—a person who believes that reality is reducible to ideas or mental entities that do not have concrete existence and therefore not observable by sense and experience (Blackburn, 1996, 184).

The author was inspired by deconstructionism which posits that within the text there are inconsistencies that deconstruct the text itself. Hence, there is no single and absolute meaning and interpretation of a text (Mautner, 2005, 138). Therefore, the works of Aristotle are not exemptions to this. His philosophy is worth reexamining, reevaluating as well as reinterpreting.

This article made use of the descriptive analysis as its method. It is descriptive in the sense that it defined and explained the different metaphysical and epistemological principles of Aristotle. It is analytic for it showed to the readers the reasons why Aristotle is an idealist and

not a realist which most people think he is.

The article is significant for it provides students and mentors of philosophy another perspective of Aristotle's thought that might be worth exploring, reviewing, and questioning. The philosophies of erstwhile thinkers are themselves products of the imperfect intellects of men. They are not free of error and doubt and therefore not absolute. The role of philosophers and students of philosophy in the present is not merely to adopt and accept the thoughts of erstwhile thinkers totally but rather to review, reflect, verify, test and even question and improve them. It is only through this that Philosophy will live on.

FRAMEWORK

Manuel T. Pinon (1983), in his work *Being and Reality: the Philosophy of Contingent Being and Contingent Reality* said that Aristotle is a realist because he believed that the different categories of things are known through experience. However, he also admitted that metaphysics is not an empirical study of the nature of things.

Metaphysics is considered as the first philosophy for it deals primarily with the first principles of reality. When one speaks of first principles they are the most fundamental constitutions, causes or elements that compose all things. They are the reasons behind the existence of things (Wardman and Creed, 1963, 43). One cannot understand things without understanding these reasons first.

Philip Stokes (2002) considered Aristotle as the father of empiricism and scientific method because he investigated things by taking into account the opinion of experts and laymen altogether.

Ronald Hoy and Nathan Oaklander (2005) stated that Aristotle repudiated the main thought of his Master Plato. While Plato emphasized the reality of the forms, Aristotle, on the other hand, spoke greatly about particular things. For Aristotle, primary substances are the individual things and not the Platonic Forms.

Mary Lousie Gill (2005) said that as to the status of the form, Aristotelian scholars were even divided among themselves. Some referred to form as universal, while others consider it particular. Some scholars would identify form with substance and others would say that form is not substance for a substance is already the combination

of matter and form. Still others believed that a universal cannot be a substance. Even on the status of matter, scholars are divided and the debate continues whether or not matter is pure potency or whether matter is a substance in itself.

There are apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in Aristotle's metaphysics that lead to varying and even conflicting views on Aristotle's thought among scholars and experts of his philosophy.

Regarding epistemology, Travis Butler and Eric Rubenstein (2004) said that in Aristotle's works, his works, the *Metaphysics* and *On the Soul* (De Anima) mentioned that his epistemological concern centered on the metaphysical nature of the objects of knowledge.

Frederick Copleston (2003) said that Aristotle's thoughts and works are to be divided into three categories or segments. The first is the Aristotle of the Academy who is very Platonic. The second is the Aristotle during his departure from the Academy, the time he went to Asia Minor. Here Aristotle already started to depart from Platonism. The third is the Aristotle of the Lyceum. Here Aristotle is already very scientific and empirical.

To understand Aristotle is to understand him in the three different segments of his life. It is important to note that some of Aristotle works were done within the transitions of these three segments. Thus, it is not surprising that in one work, Aristotle seemed to be both platonic and empirical. Besides, most of his works were compilations of his students and it is very possible these were misedited or misinterpreted or miscompiled. In fact, there is no single interpretation on Aristotle's thought. Since medieval times, there had been manifold interpretations already on Aristotle and his work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Aristotle is the father or author of the work *Metaphysics* (Glenn, 1937, 2). Etymologically, *Metaphysics* comes from two Greek words: *Meta* (beyond or after) and *Phusis/physis/Physika* which means the physical/material or natural (Vesey and Foulkes, 1999, 192). Literally it means beyond, behind or after physics. It is named so because it was believed to have been written after the work *Physics*; and also it deals with realm beyond or behind the physical. It is the study of

being or reality (anything that exists or may exist) in its most general or universal characteristics (Rowan, 1961, 17). It is also the study of the ultimate causes and first principles of reality which according to Aristotle exist beyond or behind the concrete, tangible, particular features and properties of things or of anything physical (Warrington, 1961, 115&50). Thus, metaphysics is the highest form of abstraction (Stumpf, 1975, 87).

There are four major reasons why Aristotle is an idealist. First, If Aristotle were a realist he would have not spoken of a realm beyond or behind the physical. He could have simply said that the physical is real and what one sees is reality, nothing more and nothing less. The fact that he believes and is an advocate of metaphysics makes him an idealist.

Second, Aristotle said that metaphysics is the study of the being or reality in its general and most universal characteristics. This is contrary to reality because what exists in the world are particular or individual things and not universals. Therefore, one cannot study a particular thing universally because universality is not a property of an individual physical entity.

Third, Aristotle considers the ultimate causes and first principles of things which are the very explanation and the most fundamental component of things to exist beyond or behind the physical. This simply means that reality according to Aristotle is not one with the physical but one which transcends it. So, there is no big difference between Plato and Aristotle.

Fourth, the ultimate causes and first principles of reality are metaphysical and metaphysics is the highest form of abstraction. Then it would mean that reality is only an abstraction/ideal and never physical or concrete. Therefore, Aristotle is an idealist.

The Doctrine of Hylemorphism/Hylomorphism

To be more specific with the discussion, the author would like to delve into one of the main teachings in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* which is the doctrine of *hylemorphism* or *hylomorphism* which states that all bodily entities or material things are basically composed of two elements namely: material cause or matter (*hyle*) and formal cause or

form (*morphe*). Matter is what a thing is made of, while the form refers to what a thing is (Moore and Bruder, 2005, 64-65). For example, the table is made of wood. The wood is the matter of the table while its form is its “tableness” or its being a table. Another example: the matter of the car is what the car is made of such as metal, steel, plastic, paint, rubber, etc., while form or essence of car is its “carness,” its being a car.

The form is what things are in themselves or what is called reality of things or simply the real (Kiernan, 1962, 267). The form is used by Aristotle synonymously with essence, nature, and substance (Migill, 1990, 68). Forms are metaphysical and whatever is metaphysical is universal, abstract, and intangible (Warrington, 1961, 50).

The fact that Aristotle considers forms and essences to be metaphysical is tantamount to saying that reality is universal, abstract, and intangible. Besides, how can he speak of form and essence when it cannot be experienced in real world? Nobody has actually seen or heard or touched the “bananeness” of a banana or the “treeness” of a tree. All these are just mental constructs. Therefore, Aristotle is an idealist.

Speaking of matter, there are actually two types of matter. The first is prime matter which Aristotle defines as pure potency- the absence of form, essence or determination. Another is secondary matter which is already an “informed matter” -the union of form and prime matter or this is the matter referred to as what a thing is made of (Alvira et al., 1991, 195).

The problem is how Aristotle arrived at the notion of prime matter when it is pure potency or it has no form and determination, in other words it is nothing. Nothing is unthinkable. What can be thought of or spoken of are only beings-those that exist or may exist. Again, Aristotle is speaking of things not grounded on experience and observation. Therefore, he is an idealist.

It is important to note that according to Aristotle, what exists in the sensible world is the individual thing (secondary matter) which is already the combination of prime matter and form. Form and prime matter cannot and do not exist separately in the real order of things (Kolak, 2011, 104).

How did Aristotle arrive at the knowledge of the existence of prime matter and form and that they are different from each other, when

what one can experience or observe in reality is the composite of the two which is secondary matter? Aristotle actually could not and did not observe the existence of form and prime matter. His knowledge and discussion of the existence of prime matter and form are without basis in experience. Therefore, he is an idealist.

Consequently, prime matter and substantial form or form cannot be the principle or cause of secondary matter because prime matter and form are metaphysical while secondary matter is physical. The metaphysical cannot beget something physical. Therefore, hylemorphism is impossible. Coming up with a concept of *hylemorphism* will make Aristotle an idealist.

Furthermore, if prime matter is pure potency or nothing then it cannot be combined with form in order to produce secondary matter which is physical. Again, this would prove the impossibility of hylemorphism. Therefore, hylemorphism is not based on experience and observation. By thinking and speaking of hylemorphism as true makes Aristotle is an idealist.

Aristotle's Epistemology/Theory of Knowledge

In Aristotle's epistemology or theory of knowledge, it was also explained that the forms/essences/substances are actually one with the objects or things, and are known by the intellect/mind through sense of perception. After sense perception, the active/agent intellect grasps the essence by removing the individuating notes or particular characteristics of a thing such as color, shape, size, quantity, and quality etc. and what remains in the intellect is pure essence or form which is universal and immaterial which is called idea. This process is known as abstraction (Glenn, 1933, 19-26).

Aristotle in his theory of knowledge did not explain how the senses are able to grasp the essences/forms of substance of things. This remains to be a gray area or vacuum because again the senses are physical and the form/essence and substance is metaphysical. The physical has no capacity to reach or come into contact with the metaphysical. If the essences of things are known as universals then they can only be known by intellection/reason/thinking. Therefore, sensation and observation have nothing to do with knowing the

essences of things. Knowledge is only accessible to reason and not through sensation. This makes Aristotle an idealist.

If the metaphysical realm cannot be reached by sensation and observation then metaphysics itself is not a science if one defines science as a discipline that makes use of observation as a method. Metaphysics is non verifiable and falsifiable for it has no concrete evidence and basis. Nobody has seen or touched form or substance, nature or essence. Aristotle's metaphysics is only an opinion or an idealistic interpretation of what is real without empirical evidence.

If metaphysics cannot be grasped by the senses or by observation then it is tantamount to say that Aristotle never really utilized induction as method but rather deduction. Deduction is reasoning from general to particular (Martin, 1994, 63).

Aristotle's concept of abstraction as a process of knowledge is not possible and even not practical because a person who never really knows about a particular thing cannot know that thing as it is by simply perceiving the thing by his/her five senses. He or she needs to be told or informed by somebody else who already knows what it is. For example, Tarzan goes to the city and it is his first time to see a computer, no matter how hard Tarzan would look at the computer, touch the computer, listen to its sounds and even taste it, he would never come to know that it is a computer unless somebody educates him.

Aristotle's Theory of Truth

Aristotle in his theory of truth postulates that truth or logical truth is basically the conformity/correspondence of thought to thing. This means that the intellect is able to grasp the essence of a thing in the form of an idea (universal) and this idea (universal) truly represents the thing as it is (Bittle, 1939, 169-170). For example, if one thinks of a ball pen as ball pen then that is truth. Falsity on the contrary is disconformity. It happens when one thinks of a thing as ball pen when in fact it is a pencil.

If an idea is universal then it has nothing to do with individual things. Knowledge or ideas cannot truly represent or has nothing to do with individual things. Therefore, Aristotle is an idealist and that true

knowledge of things as they are in themselves is not possible.

If ideas are universal then they are even unthinkable because they do not have thought contents. One cannot think of a universal. When one thinks, one always thinks of a particular object or person. To think of a tree without shape, color, quantity and quality is impossible. Therefore, universals are unthinkable.

CONCLUSIONS

Aristotle in his search for the ultimate causes and principles of reality went beyond the physical and arrived at metaphysics where he found his answers. In his search for true knowledge, Aristotle arrived at the universals/ideas. Because of this, he is an idealist.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The author recommends that other students of philosophy and scholars revisit the teachings of Aristotle and find out what new interpretation or understanding can be made on his thoughts and works. Further study on this matter is needed.

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