ARISTOTLE'S CRITIQUE OF PLATO'S IDEA OF THE GOOD

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When I hear that in the Absolute all personal interests are destroyed, I think I understand on the contrary how this is the only way and the only power in and by which such interests are really safe.

F. H. Bradley, Essays on Truth and Reality p.249

(1) Why is Aristotle habitually censorious of Plato's Idea of the Good? The polemic is not only distressing to Platonists, who thereupon mark down the Stagirite as of the earth, earthy; it is also, at first sight, at variance with Aristotle's affirmations elsewhere of a transcendental Good which reigns over the world; a Good, the contemplation of which is the consummation of character and the last end of man. To what precisely does Aristotle take exception?

Plato employs four-term proportions to invoke an apprehension of the Good. Is it this practice which Aristotle censures? But Aristotle cannot properly object in principle to the appeal to proportion to gain knowledge of what we do not immediately perceive. For it is by this same means that he leads us to apprehend undetermined first matter. (Phys. I, 7). If not the principle, then is it some mode of employment of the principle at which Aristotle takes umbrage?

Let us look more closely at the vigorous critique of Plato's doctrine of the Form of the Good (or more accurately, the doctrine of sundry Platonists) as set out in Nic.Eth. I, 6. Aristotle's salient charges are:

Firstly, that good in this world below belongs to a multitude of categories. There is no single notion of good.

Secondly, that knowledge of this alleged Idea of Good, Good in itself, would be quite useless. The carpenter in Platonic reverie is ridiculous; it would render the man unemployable. What is needed is skilled attention to particular goods; the physician does not cure diseases, he cures patients.

The argument is undoubtedly ad hominem. Aristotle is here in an indignant mood, akin to that in which he narrates the disappointment of the audience when they heard Plato's lecture on the Good. Instead of something pertinent to human well-being, all they received was a discourse on geometry. (Ross, Fragments p.115)

The complaint is implied again in Pol. III 4 in making the distinction between the good citizen and the good man. Talk of the unity of the virtues is all very well in its way, but it ignores the obvious fact that citizens must have a diversity of kinds of excellence according to their functions in the polis. It is
the co-ordination of different kinds to the one end which makes for the great desideratum, the maintenance of the constitution of the polis.

It appears that Aristotle finds fault with what he deems to be Plato’s undue preoccupation, even obsession, with the invocatory use of proportion. This led Plato to believe that good is some kind of ‘stuff’ which from its fountainhead in The Good is distributed through the world in varying amounts. Once gain a knowledge of this ‘stuff’ and we have the key to knowledge of everything in the world.

In Aristotle’s judgement, at the root of Plato’s errors is his failure to appreciate that things are called good in essentially different ways; that they belong to a family; that they are good by analogy. Plato did not understand that the diversity of things goes down to the fundamentals of the world; he was impatient with kinds; he overlooked the truth that the higher is received by the lower according to the ineluctable nature of the lower. Instead of perceiving that good is analogical, he thought it was univocal. As Gauthier and Jolif point out (Ar. L’Eth. à Nic. II, 48), amplifying the commentary of St. Thomas, Plato tacitly claims to possess an idea of the transcendent Good. But in this temporal span we cannot have such an idea — as St. Thomas in turn was to maintain that in this life we can apprehend God but not comprehend Him.

Plato’s fault is to have so far forgotten what is becoming to men as to forsake his proper posture as a creature and assert a vulgar familiarity with the transcendent Being; a familiarity which among other evil consequences licenses the Guardians to conduct themselves as gods on earth. (An error which Plato comes near to confessing in his retractions — Laws V, 739). Plato’s belief in univocity encourages, not the man of good sense and discernment, the *phronimos*, but the other-worldly recluse and the irresponsible visionary. (Again, remedied by Plato in the Laws, but this Aristotle ignores).

Plato’s enthusiasm, Aristotle believes, has led him to treat in an off-hand fashion the legitimate demands which the things of this world make on us; a neglect which distorts his understanding of the Good itself. In particular, his extravagance has given him a false view of politics. One of Aristotle’s special bêtes noires is Plato’s philosopher-king, the ultimate absurdity issuing from visions of glory, and failure to realise that true glory demands respect for the specificities of subordinate beings which belong to its train. A close runner-up for censure is Plato’s blindness to the principle of subsidiarity (of which more in a moment). And joined with both is the enormity of Plato’s declaration that the rule of law is only a second-best constitution. (By preferring directive to rule Plato has destroyed freedom and responsibility).

Not only is Plato’s claim to being privy with the divinity an act of hybris, it falsifies creation. For creation must be an unnecessitated act: such alone is becoming to divinity. If per impossibile we could attain the divine vantage point, we would be none the wiser. We could not deduce the existence of the
world, let alone its structure; nor would we have any warrant for a univocal science.

Aristotle, more aware of what is becoming to a man, beholds the creation in astonishment and wonder, and on the witness of the creation contemplates the Creator in distant respect and awe. Progress towards the Supreme Being is the proper business of the human kind, but it must be by slow degree through apprenticeship to the immediate practical goods. Thereby, step by step, we form our character as becomes a man, after the deity. Whereas Plato’s pretension to instant access, heedless of character, is more like fashioning the deity after our own personality — the way of parvenu anthropomorphism, with nescience as its other face. Such, it would appear, is Aristotle’s line of reflection when he dwells on the legacy of the Academy, if not always of Plato himself.

(2) Put in current terms it seems that Aristotle suspects Plato of making an ‘ideology’, of embracing ‘rationalism’ in Oakeshott’s sense of the word: ‘the formalized abridgement of the supposed substratum of rational truth contained in the tradition’ (Oakeshott, Rationalism in Politics p.4). Aristotle’s polemic is against all rationalisms; empty concepts which flourish and grow tyrannous in our proclivity to withdraw from the going concern, to see things *de nudo* instead of *in situ*. Rationalism is a practice which spells illusion and sorrow in every field to which it gains entry. Our understanding of the natural sciences, of politics, of morals, has suffered grievously in modern times from this hybris. Aristotle has good reason to set his face against rationalism and to insist on abiding by the multiple texture of analogy, where there are many voices and the music is not reduced to a single beat, as he puts it.

We sometimes hear expressions of regret at the failure to date of the natural sciences to achieve a univocal system, that Descartes’ dream has not been realised. The Aristotelian voices no such laments; rather he rejoices at the multitude and diversity of analogies of proportion which scientific enquiry has elicited.

The rationalist temper of mind demands univocity everywhere. It is a deductive mind. Whereas the Aristotelian looks to the analogical plurality of things in the world, and formulates the principle that the superior should not supersede but should stand behind, subsidise, the subordinate; each subordinate element being unique in its own right and irreplaceable. The opening observations of Aristotle’s Politics are the manifesto of the principle of subsidiarity: ‘the polis is a community of communities’. It is a note little heard in Plato’s writings.

(3) In defence of Plato, it is proper to observe that Plato is not so lost in the ecstatic nor so complacent with the univocal as Aristotle infers. Witness the great passage in the Gorgias (508a) on cosmos and geometrical equality; and in
the *Laws* (vi, 757) the clarification of the distinction between numerical and proportionate equality, in which Plato deplores the mischief wrought in human affairs by confusing the two equalities. Again, the discourse in the *Phaedo* 98 on *aitia* and *synaitia* is a statement of the theme of order and hierarchy unexcelled in brilliance by anything in Aristotle. Plato was not deficient in a sense of cosmic structure.

Does Plato’s theology merit Aristotle’s strictures? Cicero expresses the point at issue succinctly: ‘Homer attributed human feelings to the gods: I had rather he had attributed divine feelings to us’ (*Tusc. I, 26, 65*). If Aristotle implies that Plato’s theology is in the same category as Homer’s, then his judgment is indeed hasty. For the anthropomorphising of the poets, their pretensions to be privy to the gods, is something which Plato never tires of rebuking. What does it mean to say that man is like God? We have an indication of Plato’s views on the subject in *Rep.* 500–501. After remarking that what keeps human kind down to a low level and sundered from God is surrender to *eris,* he goes on to observe that a man is most fully a man, *andreikelon,* when by associating with what is divine and ordered he himself becomes divine and ordered as far as mortal may. Whereas what Homer had portrayed is a god-like being, *theoeikelon,* thereby blurring the proper distinction between the human and the divine. (There is some difference among the commentators about the proper rendering of this passage. We have followed Jaeger, *Paideia* ii, 277). There is a great difference between two senses of the expression ‘god-like’. The erroneous sense turns men into gods, or gods into men. The true sense is that a man is most god-like when he is most a man. Shorey on this passage aptly quotes Tennyson:

> What find I in the highest place,  
> But mine own phantom chanting hymns?

Aristotle advances similar tenets. In *Nic. Eth. X, 7 1177b 27 sq.* he dismisses the advice that a man should confine himself to man’s thoughts; he should, on the contrary, use his intellect, the divine element in him, to achieve as far as may be a kinship with the divine. It appears from Aristotle’s remarks elsewhere that this kinship is most apparent when a man is able to perform unnecessitated acts proper to him. When we refer to a man as god-like we refer to this emancipation, a state attained by the contemplation of the deity, the seat of the unnecessitated, and the infusion of this nobility into all the man’s acts.

(4) Up to this point there is nothing in Plato with which Aristotle should find serious fault. And yet beyond this point we may discern in Plato a residue, a fatal weakness, which filters through to compromise even Plato’s truths, and which amply warrants Aristotle’s displeasure. This is the topic, already mentioned, of kinds. Here is where Plato falters.
A thing is most god-like when it is the best of its kind. But does Plato give any intelligible account of kinds? In particular, whence does true manhood receive its specification? Plato’s assertion in the *Timaeus* concerning creation is far from satisfying, even as an *eikos logos*, ‘God being without jealousy, desired that all things should come as near as possible to being like himself’. The statement as its stands is baffling. It can only lead to the conclusion that God should have created another God. Far from clarifying the existence of our world, it renders that existence unintelligible. (The difficulty is the same as that which undoes Leibniz’s thesis that this is the best of all possible worlds: the only issue of such an unqualified demand is that of God producing a replica of Himself).

The proper solution is that God creates the best world of its kind. St. Thomas puts the matter clearly. As regards the essence of a thing ‘God cannot make a thing better than it is itself; although He can make another thing better than it; even as He cannot make the number four greater than it is; because if it were greater it would no longer be four, but another number’ (*S. Th.* I, 25,6). But, continues Thomas, as concerns what is over and above the essence, things can be better than they are. It is in this latter sense that we have man as a progressive being, thus a man can become wiser or more just. But he does so as the same man, for otherwise the betterment would not be *his* betterment.

Aristotle expresses the same point in the *Ethics*: ‘No one would choose to possess every good in the world on condition of becoming somebody else (for God possesses the good even as it is), but only while remaining himself, whatever he may be.’ (*Nic. Eth.* IX, 4 1166a 20 sq.) Gauthier and Jolif paraphrase: What good would there be in wishing that in the future another (which we would have become) possesses all; for now another — God — possesses all, and that profits us nothing!

(5) In Aristotle’s understanding, kind and the plurality of kinds in the world, is a fundamental datum. Plato, as a matter of common sense, generally subscribes to the same principle. But when he treats of the subject ex professo, the outcome is not happy. Indeed, the explanation which Plato offers in the *Timaeus* virtually denies that there are any kinds.

Doubtless aware of the paradox in the initial assertion that God creates the best, Plato hastens to bring in a qualifying factor, that of a pre-existing chaos. The act of creation then consists of bringing order out of chaos, an act accomplished by the Demiurge. If now we ask what specifies the *andreikelon*, Plato answers: the best that the Demiurge could make out of the available materials. But such an answer is one that Aristotle could not for a moment accept, and this for several reasons.

In the first place, because the noblest acts are unnecessitated acts, God above all is not to be restrained in any way in his creative act. There can be no
question of a prior recalcitrant order on which God is obliged to work. The multitude of kinds in the world must be by divine fiat, nothing else is in keeping with the divine majesty. If now we address to Aristotle the question: whence the specification of the Andreikelon? the answer is: because God willed it so by eternal decree. And it is our wisdom to learn of the articles of this decree by studying men. By virtue of the decree each man is rivetted to his specific kind, subject to the element of progress within that kind already referred to.

Secondly, it is one of Aristotle's basic tenets that the lesser is appointed to serve the higher, matter is for the sake of form. St. Thomas puts Aristotle's thesis succinctly: 'Matter is for the sake of form, and not conversely. Therefore distinction in things is not there to meet the requirement of matter, but rather the other way round; created matter is formless so that it may be adapted to a variety of forms' (S. Th. I, 47.1).

Up to a point, Plato recognizes this principle, as witness the discourse in the Phaedo, repeated in the Timaeus, on aitia and synaitia, where the lesser serves the greater. And yet, as far as the Timaeus goes, Plato is aware of it only as a skilled workman is aware that he must bend the lesser as best he can to his purposes, not giving properties to the lesser, but accepting and directing the properties already possessed. In techne we are thankful for the fixity and reliability of properties of materials, ultimately of kinds, for it is this which makes tables and houses and machines feasible. Techne is a secondary exercise which takes basic kinds for granted but advances us not at all as regards the origin of kinds.

Thus as an account of creation, the Timaeus is a failure. Lacking first the creation of formless prime matter, Plato's discourse never engages with creation. Plato may protest that he is advancing only a 'likely story'; but likely requires some similitude, and in truth there is none to be found in demiurgy. The only likely story would concern not an artificer, but one who dwells in freedom, possesses omnipotence, and acts in eutrapelia. A simple deed of spontaneous generosity has more similitude to creation than anything which Plato adduces. Aristotle is not without reason in thinking that Plato never understood the Good if we take the Timaeus as witness.

Thirdly, not only is Plato's cosmogony demeaning to the deity, it is demeaning to creatures which are written off as terata, monsters. There are no genuine kinds in this cosmos, only deformed creatures, since none are what the creator intended. None of these creatures could properly cleave to themselves, since their deformation is not in accidents but in essence or rather lack of essence. As a romance of mythical teratology the Timaeus may be entertaining, but when we are seeking rational cosmology a Frankenstein-like story is but a poor jest.

If the Timaeus is the best that Plato can do in the way of elucidating kinds,
then Aristotle has good ground for his complaint. In a world of \textit{terata} there is no genuine order, no variety of essence but only of accident, no meaningful analogy whether by attribution or by proportion. In short, an occasionalist world like Hume's in which all things are loose and separate.

(6) To seek to glorify the Principal by diminishing the dignity of the subordinates is always tempting and always disastrous. How can creatures give glory to the Creator except through their own proper dignities? Aristotle supposes Plato guilty of committing this fallacy: of lauding the Good by demeaning creatures, and of compounding the error by claiming direct access to the Good. Given his premisses Aristotle is undoubtedly correct. But how far Plato was in fact guilty of this hybris and to what extent we should attribute his enthusiastic words to missionary fervour, is another question.