

# **A Comparison of the Philosophies of Plato and Aristotle**

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Philosophic projects, interpretations of reality and changes in epistemology have varied vastly throughout time. An important turning point in epistemology arrived with Aristotle's revised conceptual framework based on Plato's philosophical view of the world. Aristotle, though Plato's "star student", eventually composed his own philosophical system for interpreting reality that differs greatly from that of his mentor. This distinction can be seen in differing opinions between Plato and Aristotle of forms and causation, particularly as they relate to change, eternal ideals, and validity of sensual observation to philosophic interpretation.

Plato's idea of interpretation through senses is somewhat similar to that of Parmenides. Parmenides stated that senses cannot be relied upon, and that truth may only be arrived at through reason, which Parmenides saw as 'pure' since reason, in his opinion did not require secular interpretation, as well as rejecting change.

Plato did not necessarily reject change, but seemed to agree with Parmenides, "diminishing the reality of the material world observed by the senses" (Lindbergh, 48), which is supported in his own words in this passage: "do not let habit... direct your sightless eyes and sounding ear and tongue, but judge by reason" (Against the Mathematicians). Plato held that there is a world of 'eternal forms' that is perfect, and equates this with the perfection of reason, while he argued that we live in a material world, where the forms of reality have connections to unperceivable, perfect eternal forms. He exemplifies his argument in the infamous allegory of the cave, implying in the passage from The Republic that the world we perceive are of a world of shadows, only

hinting at the truth, eternal forms we cannot see. This example demonstrates the unreliable nature of sensory observation, demonstrating Parmenides' idea that logical reason is the path to absolute truth. It is important to note that Plato's world of ideal forms are not really a separate reality, nor even solely a state of mind, but rather a perfect template that material objects are constructed by.

Aristotle on the other hand rejects Plato's constructed world of eternal forms, at least implicitly in his definition of nature. In Aristotle's Physics, he first rejects Parmenides' claim that all things are eternal and there is no change in the passage, "products of art have no innate impulse to change... but nature is a source or cause of being moved (an innate impulse to change)" (Aristotle, 192). Aristotle's dichotomist view of the world is not based on Plato's division of eternal versus material, but rather nature versus art. While Plato was well versed in the academic mores of the Pythagorais, Aristotle did not see mathematics as something pure, part of an eternal world. Rather, Aristotle's philosophical construct of the world was rooted in reality and in the assumption that things can change: a refutation of Parmenides' assumption. For Aristotle change could be natural, in that nature has some 'innate impulse' to change, or altered as products of art. He may have deduced these to be the same thing, since products of art must be changed by products of nature (in this example humankind) and therefore this could be construed as simply nature's innate impulse to change applied to the impulse to create, modify, or destroy art.

Aristotle continues by stating that physics, in this context, the nature of change, can be described by his system of causation. The very nature of Aristotle's list of

causations demonstrates the degrees of difference in trust that both Plato and Aristotle were willing to put in the senses to interpret reality. Plato maintains that ideal forms that we cannot sense and Aristotle's causes apply sensual observation to define reality. In an attempt to find similarity between the two 'philosophic projects', it is important to note that Aristotle's final cause seems to imply he at least agreed with Plato that there is a teleological force at work in reality by the implicit notion that objects have some sort of purpose that extend beyond their physical characteristics.

As Gaarder explains in *Sophie's World*, Plato refused Aristotle's idea of forms, arguing that his view of the world was "upside down", and that Plato "was trapped in a mythical world picture in which the human imaginations was confused with the real world" (Gaardner, 107). Plato maintains that there is a world of ideal forms, as we see material reflections of perfect forms, as prisoners seeing shadows on a cave wall. He then constructed a mathematical (eternal form) system of explaining processes, still drawing from his world of ideals. Aristotle found no difference between matter and form, relying on sensations of nature to explain itself, reflected in his statement, "nature means two things: the matter and the form" (Physics, 199). For Aristotle, there is not a world of ideal templates, but rather the reverse: ideal templates are constructed from repeated contact with different material objects, and those materials objects have no perfect constructs – they are not simply reflections of the unperceivable. According to Aristotle, it is by repeated contact that we can imagine a generalized 'form', though this form may be different to different people, depending on the types of contacts they make – there is not a universal norm.

This paradigm shift represents the most important distinction between the philosophic projects of Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle argues that sensual perception can indeed be relied upon when constructing explanations of the world. Not only did Aristotle reject Plato's world of ideals, but also interjected change into the essence of nature, explained by "Aristotle believed that everything in nature has the potentiality of realizing, or achieving, a specific 'form'" (Gaardner, 109). No doubt such realizations were nurtured by Aristotle's own study of biology as well as only joining Plato's academy late in Plato's life, which likely gave Aristotle a historic framework to work within as well as a chance to apply his independent analysis. Aristotle's new conceptual framework for understanding the world was so revolutionary that it lasted for hundreds of years. Credit is due to Plato, for Aristotle did not simply reject an old idea set to introduce his own, but rather he built upon previous ideas to present a revised epistemology.