

James Klusaritz

The School of Athens



In his *metaphysics*, the great Aristotle writes: “All human beings desire by nature to know” (MP, 980a21). For centuries inquiries into this nature gripped ancient Greek philosophers, the most prominent of which are depicted in Raphael’s fresco, *School of Athens* (1509-1511). At the forefront of this painting we find Aristotle and his teacher, Plato, engaged in philosophical discussion. Given historical contexts and the manner in which the pair is depicted, one may speculate that the topic of their exchange relates to the aforementioned nature of human knowledge: What can we have knowledge of and which types should be pursued? In this paper I will develop this interpretation, first discussing the pair’s competing metaphysics and then transitioning to ways these differences manifest in parts of their respective epistemologies.

Two essential questions in the branch of metaphysics include “what is?” (ontology) and “What makes F, F?” (taxonomy). Writing in the wake of presocratic skepticism, Plato attempted to reconcile both of these aspects of reality through his theory of Forms. According to Plato, Forms are immutable, perfect objects and properties of which all material things are merely manifestations of. That is, Plato argues that a material thing is F only insofar as it participates in the Form of F; the form of F is quite literally “F itself,” and F-things represent “merely the likeness of these [perfect] Forms” (Republic, 476d). The ontological dependence of the physical world on the Forms implies that Forms are the truest “what is.” According to Plato, the Forms exist outside of space and time in the immutable realm of Forms. It is perhaps with this in mind that the *School of Athens* depicts Plato to be pointing upwards as he presumably attempts to convince Aristotle of his metaphysics.

As the literature in his hand indicates, Aristotle’s empirical outlook would find little allure in Plato’s argument. At the root of Aristotle’s qualms with Plato’s account is a category mistake between his ontology (“what is”) and his use of predication (“what can be said of what is”). That is, Plato imagines his Forms to both exist independently of material things (“what is”) whilst being said to be a quality (“what can be said”) of them. For one thing, Aristotle argues, the concept of Forms unnecessarily expands Plato’s ontology; Plato’s theory quite literally posits the existence of new entities (Forms) of which there are “no fewer than the things in this world” (MP, 990b5). Perhaps more concerningly, Aristotle hints that the dual-status of the Form’s opens it to a “Third Man” (MP, 1039a) dilemma. That is, “Man” as a Form is the universal that is predicated of all individual men. So, in a world of only three men, (A, B, and C) are men insofar as they participate in the form of Man. However Man is also a Man, so our set of Man expands to (A, B, C, and Man); we will need another Form to be predicated on this new set, leading to an infinite regress. In a word, “it would seem impossible for anything spoken of universally to be a [‘what is’]” (MP, 991b).

Depicted by Raphael with his hand stretched outward, presumably gesturing toward nature, Aristotle contended that answers to fundamental metaphysical questions could be found in our reality as we experience it. In his *Categories*, Aristotle reconsiders the ontological facet of

this metaphysical confusion. In this early work, he identifies ten “ways of being” including substance, quantity, quality, and so forth (C, 1b25). Defining “[primary] substance” as the truest “what is,” Aristotle explains: “It is both the ultimate subject¹, which is no longer ‘said of’² anything else, and whatever, being a this, is also separable” (MP, 1017b25). Put differently, a [primary] substance is a particular subject which can have things predicated of it but not vice versa. All other ways of being are secondary insofar as they cannot exist separately from what [they are] in” (C, 1a25). Furthermore, the substance is hylomorphic: it exists as an inseparable compound of the matter of which it is composed and form, the manner in which it is composed (D-A, 412a15). This is a far cry from Plato’s ontological account: while Plato would contend that a red basketball exists and is red because it participates in the Forms of basketball and red, Aristotle would contend that the basketball is a form-matter compound of which red is predicated: its quality of red is not separate, but inherent to the basketball and the basketball as a substance is of ontological priority, as opposed to Plato’s Forms. Equipped with a natural ontological account, Aristotle next considers the taxonomic account of his metaphysics by examining what makes a substance a certain kind of substance: what is the intrinsic nature (essence) of a certain “what is?” In a similar fashion to Plato, Aristotle looks primarily to a substance’s form for the answer: “The form is the nature more than the matter is” (P, 193b). While matter (e.g, wood) has the “potentiality” to be many things (e.g, bed, table), it is the form that provides that actuality to a substance, aligning it with a distinct essence. While Plato Forms exist separately from material things, Aristotle’s form is a distinct, but inseparable part of substance.

As aforementioned, Aristotle and Plato’s respective metaphysics play a crucial role in their epistemologies. Given the ontological privilege of the Forms, Plato holds that they are the true objects of knowledge (Phaedo, 65e); since the Forms are invisible to the senses, this knowledge can only be acquired through a process of introspective recollection (Phaedo, 75e). Furthermore, to obtain true wisdom, one must acquire knowledge of the “Good,” the most privileged of all Forms. Analogizing the Good to the Sun in his famous *Allegory of The Cave*, it is the Form that illuminates all others (Republic, 507b-509c). With this metaphor at the cornerstone of Plato’s epistemology, Raphael perhaps had even more reason to depict Plato gesturing upward.

Given Aristotle’s practical metaphysics by comparison, his view of Plato’s epistemology is perhaps unsurprising: “Above all one might ask what in the world the Forms contribute to our understanding of perceptible things” (MP, 991a8-10). Aristotle may ask: How could the knowledge of one “Good” be of practical use to both a doctor and a carpenter? Why should I look to an invisible world for answers instead of the one in front of me? With this, Aristotle sets out to provide a natural account for the obtainment of human knowledge: perceptions form

¹ A subject is what a statement is about

² A taxonomic classification such that it’s opposite cannot logically be said about its subject (e.g, Socrates is human)

memories, memories build experience, and patterns identified and understood through experience build crafts. While perceptions and memories are perhaps straight-forward, the last two links of aristotelian knowledge could use explanation. Using the discipline of baseball as an example, we can think of an experientially knowledgeable (manual) pitcher as having “knowledge of the particulars” (MP, 981a15) such that he will know the optimal pitch to throw to a batter encountered many times before. On the other hand, a craft-level (master) pitcher will have “knowledge of the universals” such that they know *why* a pitch is optimal given a batter’s individual characteristics, and can apply this knowledge to an array of different batters. In summary, from crafts to virtue, Aristotle associates the learning process of practical knowledge with a heavy experiential character; our experiences give us an intuitive understanding of something that ultimately develops into knowledge of its “first principles and causes” (MP, 982a). With this in mind, Aristotle in the *School of Athens* can also be gesturing forward so as to say “go out and experience the world!”

In conclusion, Raphael’s depiction of Aristotle and Plato in the *School of Athens* (1509-1511) likely serves to exemplify the competing approaches that the esteemed philosophers took in their inquiries of the world. While Plato points toward the heavens in representation of his idealistic philosophy, Aristotle gestures outward in representation of his empirical, practical philosophy. Since these ideals transcend philosophical branches and occur throughout the entirety of their respective works, it will perhaps never be known what specifically the pair were made to be discussing in the fresco.