



On Man in the Universe

Aristotle

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Providing newly revised translations of selections from Aristotle's most important works, five lectures consider widespread topics that affect everyday people, from the natural world to human nature.

On Man in the Universe Details

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Cws says

888.5

James says

Philosophy has always been hard for me to read, it takes alot to work through the ideas

Justin says

Only cuts out the boring bits.

Chris says

A man may be scorned for not being able to jump to the moon, but he should be commended when he has mastered the art of jumping over a tree. Some of the most celebrated thinkers of all time including Plato, Aristotle, Copernicus, Kant, Newton, Darwin, Freud, Jung, and Einstein all suffer the same slanderous buffeting by the forgetful zeitgeist of modern science: "They were wrong". But the question shouldn't center on whether or not they were wrong about some things. In the pursuit of truth they were RIGHT, headed in the right direction, despite having drawn some wrong conclusions. They were right for their time. They were right in their fearless quest of the unknown. They were right for having agonized over something they believed in, for having written with their own blood, for being relentless in their burning zeal to confront and expose error in their own society and to bring the boon of social reform and a renewal of hope. And they did this with a level of accuracy that far outstripped other thinkers in their own time. A person need not be accurate for all Time...only for their time.

Aristotle was a renaissance man in his own era: astronomist, botanist, zoologist, political scientist (tutored Alexander the Great), theatre and literary critic...all this, and still he is preeminently remembered as a philosopher. But his brand of philosophy harkens back to its simple definition, not as a branch of knowledge concerned chiefly with metaphysical musings, but rather a love of all knowledge and wisdom (philo—"loving", sophia—"wisdom"). He was a forerunner in analytic philosophy, which means that above all he was a logician. Aristotle resembles the great Eratosthenes (called 'Beta' in his own age for being supposedly the second best in the world in any field), who calculated the circumference of the earth from Egypt in the 3rd century BCE, using the small arc of his geographical position as his only frame of reference. It was like shaking a closed box and deducting its contents from the faint taps, rattles, and imbalance that resulted. Given his experiences and the materials he had to work with, he went as far theoretically as any many could, in any age.

I personally found the sections of his Nicomachean Ethics, Politics, and Metaphysics to be the most engaging(in that order). It is truly a wonder to watch the probings of a genius into the relatively virgin and unmapped territories of knowledge. He even tears up the floors of the then current science with the basic

question 'why', saying that the 'why' of philosophical pursuit is what separates the facts-people from idea-people. "Wisdom is knowledge of principles and causes", and it is more an 'art', in his opinion, than a science.

Einstein said that imagination is more important than knowledge. Why? Because imagination is about calculating cumulative tendencies of the objective world, and subjectively creating a larger, composite picture from that data. Give an imaginative person the tip of an iceberg and he could limn its entire mass. If someone should say, 'but he didn't see that air pocket there', or 'that vein of water is less solid than he supposed', we should respond that this is a natural result of theorizing (the true task of the philosopher/scientist) and not merely observing (historian). Aristotle treated philosophy like a living art form rather than a dead science of empirical facts, and his ideas will live on because of it. "We call the masters wiser, not because they can do things, but because they grasp the theory and understand the causes."

Cody says

"It is admitted that moderation and the mean are best, and therefore it will clearly be best to possess the gifts of fortune in moderation; for in that condition of life men are most ready to listen to reason. But he who greatly excels in beauty, strength, birth, or wealth, or on the other hand who is very poor, or very weak, or very much disgraced, finds it difficult to follow reason. Of these two kinds, the former grow into violent and great criminals, the latter into rogues and petty rascals." -Aristotle in Politics

"Is then the term hot used in one sense or in many? To answer this we must ascertain what special effect is attributed to a hotter substance, and if there be several such, how many these may be. A body then is in one sense said to be hotter than another, if it impart a greater amount of heat to an object in contact with it. In a second sense, that is said to be hotter which causes the keener sensation when touched, and especially if the sensation be attended with pain. This criterion, however, would seem sometimes to be a false one; for occasionally it is the idiosyncrasy of the individual that causes the sensation to be painful. Again, of two things, that is the hotter which the more readily melts a fusible substance, or sets on fire an inflammable one. Again, of two masses of one and the same substance, the larger is said to have more heat than the smaller. Again, of two bodies, that is said to be the hotter which takes the longer time in cooling, as also we call that which is rapidly heated hotter than that which is long about it; as though the rapidity implied proximity and this again similarity of nature, while the want of rapidity implied distance and this again dissimilarity of nature." -Aristotle in On the Parts of Animals

"When the objects of an inquiry, in any department, have principles, conditions, or elements, it is through acquaintance with these that knowledge, that is to say scientific knowledge, is attained. For we do not think that we know a thing until we are acquainted with its primary conditions or first principles, and have carried our analysis as far as its simplest elements. Plainly therefore in the science of Nature, as in other branches of study, our first task will be to try to determine what relates to its principles. The natural way of doing this is to start from the things which are more knowable and obvious to us and proceed towards those which are clearer and more knowable by nature; for the same things are not 'knowable relatively to us' and 'knowable' without qualification. So in the present inquiry we must follow this method and advance from what is more obscure by nature, but clearer to us, towards what is more clear and more knowable by nature. Now what is to us plain and obvious at first is rather confused masses, the elements and principles of which become known to us later by analysis. Thus we must advance from generalities to particulars; for it is a whole that is best known to sense-perception, and a generality is a kind of whole, comprehending many things within it,

like parts. Much the same thing happens in the relation of the name to the formula. A name, e.g. 'round', means vaguely a sort of whole: its definition analyses this into its particular senses. Similarly a child begins by calling all men 'father', and all women 'mother', but later on distinguishes each of them." -Aristotle in *Metaphysics*

"If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is, and of which of the sciences or capacities it is the object." -Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*

In reading this compilation of Aristotle's works, it is not difficult to see why Aristotle is sometimes called the father of modern science. This title is hotly debated, and of course there very easily could have been others before Aristotle whose works simply did not survive through time, but beyond those considerations, I think it is a fair assessment. In each book in the compilation, (*Physics*, *Parts of Animals*, *Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Poetics*) Aristotle tries to break down each subject to its most elementary points. Sometimes the insights are surprisingly profound; other times they are laughably derived from contemporary superstition. In either case, they are interesting and relevant.

When reading these treatises, it is important to remember that we only have a portion of Aristotle's works, many things were lost to time. That being the case, there are many promises to return to comments at a later time, and we no longer have the later explanations recorded if he ever made them. In the *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle records his observations and experiments on local wildlife of the island of Lesbos. He makes the first attempt we have a known record of to classify animals into groups based on similar bodily features and to distinguish various species within those groups. This is of course something we take for granted today, but at the time, it helped pave the way for revolutions in natural science. I thought one of the interesting things about his observations was to truly note his lack of tools. I obtained a text version of the piece online after reading it just to search how many times the word "heat" is used (90 times) in this less than 200 page thesis. I kept noticing how he came back to the topic as both an analogy to explain other concepts, but primarily as conjecture concerning his observations. This is the reason I chose the quote that I chose, because when I thought about it further, I realized that that poor bastard had no thermometer! Imagine how difficult it would be to determine a creature's tolerance to hot and cold, the running temperature of the creature's body, blood, and excrement when you have no standard by which or tool with which to measure! Yet as far as I could read in his other works, he makes no attempt to solve that problem by attempting to create some sort of standard and way to measure, he just falls back on his primary education (philosophy) to theorize on what causes hot and cold, and what they mean to the physical specimen. Plato really did a number on this kid, let me tell ya. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle contemplates existence itself, and he postulates that all things have a cause, so our greatest goal should be to find the root of all causes and thus we can find the meaning of existence. This sounds kind of hokey, but is actually quite similar to the "theory of everything" modern physicists have been chasing for decades in an attempt to reconcile general relativity with quantum mechanics. He then tries to define existence, which would seem to be a good starting point for explaining it, then he goes on to discuss the potential for existence vs. actual existence and causality. He also mentions the concept all you pot-smoking hippies might know by heart, that all of existence is one thing, and only our perceptions differentiate between substances or events or beings. He also gives an early rendition of the conundrum associated with the chronology of chickens and eggs. This book is a little out there, but is interesting, especially if you like philosophy. The last of the books I will speak of was my favorite, *Politics*. In this treatise, Aristotle mostly tries to refute, but ends up stealing some concepts from Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*.

In my life, I have found that any discussion of politics seems to require self contradiction, because the governance of other people is just not a natural state. Aristotle does my theory well, but still gives us a fascinating glimpse into ancient Greek civilizations. In many early democracies he speaks of, a person is criminally judged by a jury of 501 citizens, ranging from poor to rich. If you were poor, you were paid to attend what we would call jury duty, but also public forums to discuss policy. If you were rich, you were taxed for not showing up. Modern conservatives would probably call this class warfare due to liberal democrat policies (thanks Obama!). It is impressive how Aristotle actually compiled a small library of the constitutions of various Greek city-states and studied them so he could write this book. It is a shame that his collection did not survive the ages, because now his references and a few quotes from his works are all we have left of those various legal documents; but at least we have those, thanks to Aristotle. The main theme that keeps recurring in both Politics and Ethics is moderation. Aristotle repeatedly states in Politics that the happiness of a state is contingent on its having a large middle class, and for its rulers to come from the middle class. I would have to say that theory certainly has merit, and Aristotle also uses historical leaders who were considered great men to prove his point. What I find very interesting is how he describes the lifestyle of various people and how they should lead their lives. He posits that things like food should be communal, and people of various classes should share common meals together. You might ask, "Well just who is providing that food?" and Aristotle's answer would be, "Slaves." Slaves would be the farmers, craftsmen, and tradesmen in Aristotle's perfect world, as those occupations are ones he considered vulgar to free citizens. He mentions that the citizens should have ample leisure time with which to study, create art/philosophy/music/literature, and train in gymnastics. His ideal state is essentially a small group of poor slaves, a small group of wealthy people, and a huge mass of enlightened middle class citizens that do most of the thinking and administering for the state. If I were alive 100 years ago, I would have said that any state that is predicated on slavery being a requisite for its foundation is vulgar and inhuman. Being alive now however, I am excited by the prospect of applying some of Aristotle's concepts to modern society for one very specific reason; robotics. As we all know, we are rapidly approaching a time when a lot of manual labor has been handed to somewhat autonomous machinery, and even more tasks are slated for the same fate. I hope as this transition occurs, we can keep Aristotle in mind and consider some of the notions he presents in Politics. I do not have any evidence for this, but I feel like this work may have inspired Gene Roddenberry when he created the Star Trek The Next Generation series. He was obviously familiar with the Greek Greats, and his society resembles that of Aristotle due to human-kind abolishing war and using technology to allow all people the equal opportunity to better themselves without having to worry about things like sustenance and shelter. So let's all hope for that, I say!

I feel like we live in a society where being wrong, or mistaken, or throwing out an idea that is not the best is tantamount to mortal sin. Particularly concerning politics, I feel like our totally interconnected modern world has shaped society into "inside the box" thinkers to a pathological degree. Upon suggesting something new, people seem to most often be shouted down with statistics or studies that are probably only moderately relevant to the topic at hand by someone who hurriedly Wikipedia-fact-checked his or her comments. I feel like we have definitely lost the art of true debate in part because we take even the most poorly designed "studies" as gospel instead of actually reading them and following their implications with healthy skepticism. I suppose it is human nature to attempt to assert one's superiority over another by showing you can skim through the headlines that detail what other people have gleaned from the most rudimentary scientific examination of a topic faster than someone else, but I think the overload is taking something away from us, and it certainly disincentivizes personal research. People with the leisure time required to, no longer try to educate themselves or experiment in their own way to find solutions to problems; just google the answer! Whatever you do, do not try to read or experiment in novel ways to come to your own conclusions though, that makes you a weirdo. That is the message I feel we send with our current level of public and even private discourse; and perhaps reading the wisdom and yes, even the foolishness, of the great people from the past can humble us into being more open-minded. I mean, Aristotle is a household name world-wide and is associated with greatness, even though some of his conclusions and theories are clearly ludicrous to us now.

Steven Peterson says

Just as Plato was likely the greatest of Socrates' students, so, too, was Aristotle the mightiest of Plato's pupils who studied at his Academy. His "Metaphysics," one of the most important components of this collection of Aristotle's works, addresses the fundamental issue of knowing. And even though he breaks with his mentor in many of his works, in the end he remains a good Platonist in that he believes that humans can come to understand essential reality. Early in the "Metaphysics," he says that "wisdom is knowledge of principles and causes." This version does a competent job of translating this important work.

While Aristotle does not accept the Platonic theory of forms in its pure statement, he contends that through thinking and wisdom, humans can come to understand the essences, the substance of that which is. He argues for a deductive method of inquiry, whereas the Sophists, his antagonists, began with induction from sensory experience and observed facts. He claims that:

"...the things best to know are first principles and causes. For through them and from them all other things may be known but not they through the things covered by them. Supreme then among the sciences and superior to all subordinate science is that which knows the end for which everything takes place, which is the good for each thing and, as a whole, the highest good for all nature."

Aristotle is confident that there is an objective reality "out there," beyond human senses, but one which can be understood.

Aristotle specifically targets the Sophist Protagoras. He claims that "...if all men are equally wrong and right, a person like that can neither speak nor tell us anything, for he is saying at the same time both 'yes' and 'no.'" He perceives that the key weakness of the Sophist worldview is that Protagoras and his peers see the sensory world as the "real" world, or as Aristotle puts it, "they took the sense world to be all that is." However, Aristotle contends that there is more than just sensation to guide our understanding of "the real."

He sees that there are "essences" and "substances" that are the underlying truth of things as they are and as they are potentially. He simply observes that "Whatever then is produced is produced by something (by this I mean the starter of the process), and out of something (and let this be matter...), and becomes something..." There is a reality before our senses can apprehend its overt manifestation. In the end, there is something that exists before our sensation of those objects. Through reason, humans must try to understand the end of things, their purposes or goals. Of the community and politics, Aristotle says that:

Aristotle was highly critical of the Sophists; Aristotle in the "Metaphysics" named names, in the instance noted above, Protagoras.

Some of the basic points in this work: (1) there is a definable reality that we humans can know through the exercise of reason; (2) right and wrong are concepts with a clear meaning that can be ascertained by wise people; (3) people and their community are wed.

As to the third point, Aristotle said in his "Politics," "...he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state." Humans and their political community must exist together.

In the end, this is an important work in the history of philosophy (and political philosophy), laying out one vision of how we know what we know. The work attacks those who are skeptical about an objective reality

that humans can come to understand. All in all, a competently done translation of a key work in the philosophical conversation over the generations. Aristotle
