

Metaphysics <http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/a/aristotl.htm#Metaphysics>

Aristotle's editors gave the name "Metaphysics" to his works on *first philosophy*, either because they went *beyond* or followed *after* his physical investigations. Aristotle begins by sketching the history of philosophy. For Aristotle, philosophy arose historically after basic necessities were secured. It grew out of a feeling of curiosity and wonder, to which religious myth gave only provisional satisfaction. The earliest speculators (i.e. Thales, Anaximenes, Anaximander) were philosophers of nature. The Pythagoreans succeeded these with mathematical abstractions. The level of pure thought was reached partly in the Eleatic philosophers (such as Parmenides) and Anaxagoras, but more completely in the work of Socrates. Socrates' contribution was the expression of general conceptions in the form of definitions, which he arrived at by induction and analogy. For Aristotle, the subject of metaphysics deals with the first principles of scientific knowledge and the ultimate conditions of all existence. More specifically, it deals with existence in its most fundamental state (i.e. being *as* being), and the essential attributes of existence. This can be contrasted with mathematics which deals with existence in terms of lines or angles, and not existence as it is in itself. In its universal character, metaphysics superficially resembles dialectics and sophistry. However, it differs from dialectics which is tentative, and it differs from sophistry which is a pretence of knowledge without the reality.

The axioms of science fall under the consideration of the metaphysician insofar as they are properties of *all* existence. Aristotle argues that there are a handful of universal truths. Against the followers of Heraclitus and Protagoras, Aristotle defends both the laws of contradiction, and that of excluded middle. He does this by showing that their denial is suicidal. Carried out to its logical consequences, the denial of these laws would lead to the sameness of all facts and all assertions. It would also result in an indifference in conduct. As the science of being *as* being, the leading question of Aristotle's metaphysics is, What is meant by the real or true substance? Plato tried to solve the same question by positing a universal and invariable element of knowledge and existence -- the forms -- as the only real permanent besides the changing phenomena of the senses. Aristotle attacks Plato's theory of the forms on three different grounds.

First, Aristotle argues, forms are powerless to explain *changes* of things and a thing's ultimate extinction. Forms are not causes of movement and alteration in the physical objects of sensation. *Second*, forms are equally incompetent to explain how we arrive at *knowledge* of particular things. For, to have knowledge of a particular object, it must be knowledge of the substance which is *in* that things. However, the forms place knowledge outside of particular things. Further, to suppose that we know particular things better by adding on their general conceptions of their forms, is about as absurd as to imagine that we can count numbers better by multiplying them. Finally, if forms were needed to explain our knowledge of particular objects, then forms must be used to explain our knowledge of objects of art; however, Platonists do not recognize such forms. The *third* ground of attack is that the forms simply cannot explain the *existence* of particular objects. Plato contends that forms do not exist *in* the particular objects which partake in the forms. However, that substance of a particular thing cannot be separated from the thing itself. Further, aside from the jargon of "participation," Plato does not explain the relation between forms and particular things. In reality, it is merely metaphorical to describe the forms as patterns of things; for, what is a genus to one object is a species to a higher class, the same idea will have to be both a form and a particular thing at the same time. Finally, on Plato's account of

the forms, we must imagine an intermediate link between the form and the particular object, and so on *ad infinitum*: there must always be a "third man" between the individual man and the form of man.

For Aristotle, the form is not something outside the object, but rather *in* the varied phenomena of sense. Real substance, or true being, is not the abstract form, but rather the *concrete* individual thing. Unfortunately, Aristotle's theory of substance is not altogether consistent with itself. In the *Categories* the notion of substance tends to be nominalistic (i.e., substance is a concept we apply to things). In the *Metaphysics*, though, it frequently inclines towards realism (i.e., substance has a real existence in itself). We are also struck by the apparent contradiction in his claims that science deals with universal concepts, and substance is declared to be an individual. In any case, substance is for him a merging of matter into form. The term "matter" is used by Aristotle in four overlapping senses. *First*, it is the underlying structure of changes, particularly changes of growth and of decay. *Secondly*, it is the potential which has implicitly the capacity to develop into reality. *Thirdly*, it is a kind of stuff without specific qualities and so is indeterminate and contingent. *Fourthly*, it is identical with form when it takes on a form in its actualized and final phase.

The development of potentiality to actuality is one of the most important aspects of Aristotle's philosophy. It was intended to solve the difficulties which earlier thinkers had raised with reference to the beginnings of existence and the relations of the one and many. The actual vs. potential state of things is explained in terms of the causes which act on things. There are four causes:

1. Material cause, or the elements *out of which* an object is created;
2. Efficient cause, or the means *by which* it is created;
3. Formal cause, or the expression of *what* it is;
4. Final cause, or the end *for which* it is.

Take, for example, a bronze statue. Its material cause is the bronze itself. Its efficient cause is the sculptor, insofar as he forces the bronze into shape. The formal cause is the idea of the completed statue. The final cause is the idea of the statue as it *prompts* the sculptor to act on the bronze. The final cause tends to be the same as the formal cause, and both of these can be subsumed by the efficient cause. Of the four, it is the formal and final which is the most important, and which most truly gives the explanation of an object. The final end (purpose, or teleology) of a thing is realized in the full perfection of the object itself, not in our conception of it. Final cause is thus internal to the nature of the object itself, and not something we subjectively impose on it.

God to Aristotle is the first of all substances, the necessary first source of movement who is himself unmoved. God is a being with everlasting life, and perfect blessedness, engaged in never-ending contemplation.