

Bibliography – Notes

LART602

Aristotle: *Physics, Nicomachean Ethics*

Aristotle asserts a general principle of rationalism (**Rationalism**) at the outset of his inquiry into physical nature. He claims generally that knowledge of a thing consists in an understanding (“cognition”, in this translation) of that thing, and that this understanding will consist in knowledge of its causes and primary “principles”.

In every line of inquiry into something that has principles or causes or elements, we achieve knowledge – that is, scientific knowledge [*episteme*] – by cognizing them; for we think we cognize a thing when we know its primary causes and primary principles, all the way to its elements. (*Physics* I.1.184a11-14)

Our definition of rationalism (Rationalism) entails that knowledge be of a logical object, which Aristotle’s “principles” will be. Note, however, that Aristotle qualifies this statement of Rationalism, for his claim applies only to things having principles or causes or elements.

Here, Aristotle asserts perhaps a stronger thesis of Rationalism for the physical world. Nothing happens in this world completely arbitrarily, “in just any old way.”

“We must first of all grasp the fact that nothing that exists is naturally such as to act or be affected in just any old way by the agency of just any old thing; nor does something come to be just any old thing from just any old thing ...” (*Physics* I.1.188a33-35)

The musical comes to be musical from the non-musical. Change, for Aristotle, is a rational phenomenon insofar as it always involves logical “opposites”. The musical becomes un-musical or vice versa.

Aristotle is also a naturalist as we understand that term. Naturalism is the doctrine maintaining that the principle defining a natural body is internal or intrinsic to it. This idea enables Aristotle to distinguish natural from non-natural objects – i.e., artifacts.

“All these things evidently differ from those that are not naturally constituted, since each of them has within itself a principle of motion [*kinesis*] and stability in place, in growth and decay, or in alteration.

In contrast to these, a bed, a cloak, or any other <artifact> – insofar as it is described as such, and to the extent that it is a product of a craft – has no innate impulse to change; but insofar as it is coincidentally made of stone or earth or a mixture of these, it has an innate impulse to change, and just to that extent.” (*Physics* II.1.192b13-21)

Natural objects have an intrinsic nature. Whatever stone is, that nature is internal to it. Man-made objects, on the other hand, have no innate “source of change”, as Aristotle puts it here. While a stone may have an innate tendency to seek the center of the universe, a stone stairway has no innate nature insofar as it is a stairway. Qua stone, however, the stairway has the tendency to seek the center.

“It is also correct to say that luck is contrary to reason. For rational judgment tells us what is always or usually the case, whereas luck is found in events that happen neither always nor usually. And so, since causes of this sort are indeterminate, luck is also indeterminate.” (*Physics* II.5.197a19-22)

Burkert: *Greek Religion*

“For Aristotle too the ‘first philosophy’ is essentially theology, insofar as it has to do with the highest cause of being. And all of Plato’s pupils are convinced of the divinity of the cosmos, which finds its expression in the regularity of the orbits of the heavenly bodies.” (Burkert, 329)

Burkert describes Aristotle first mover principle as a “*noeton*”: “What moves without itself being moved is the goal as grasped in thought, the *noeton*, in particular the beautiful. The first unmoved mover is accordingly the first and most beautiful being; it moves because it is the goal of love and longing.” (330-1) Cf. Plato’s *Eros* principle.

On the development of an increasingly remote and abstract godhead, Burkert remarks on the inversion resulting in the place of actual human life. With an overarching principle of goodness defining all being, we have little choice but to regard “evil” as irrational:

The price, however, was high. A sublime philosophy of mind turns into a theory of ghosts and thus agrees with primitive and diffuse superstition. The figures of poetry could offer orientation and clarity; demons are incomprehensible, giving the feeling of sheer abandonment to powers with whom one must somehow come to terms in an ultimately meaningless effort. The religious practice as prescribed by tradition is ostensibly observed, but is secretly transformed into magic. (332)

A consequence of the idealization of the good, the divine – the rational – is the introduction of unreason and disorder into the local world. Where previously we had a frank anthropomorphism, now we have a sophisticated world apart, terror and darkness at home.