

## Comparison of Plato and Aristotle's views of how knowledge is obtained and the body and soul

Plato believed that as well as the material world in which we live and experience different things, there is another world, where forms are present. This eternal world is more real than the world we live in. Plato said that the world we experience through our senses (the empirical world) is in a constant state of flux (always changing). This meant that we could never obtain true knowledge of anything but it enables us to have opinions; it is full of sensible particulars (objects which can be experienced through the senses but never known).

But Plato believed that even though we can not gain true knowledge of the forms in this world, we do have an indistinctive understanding of them. For example, when we use the word 'cat' to describe a particular animal we see, we are not just classifying it, we are referring to some particular quality that it shares with other cats. They all share the form of a cat. Plato also claimed that, in the world of the forms, there is an ideal cat, created by God. The cats we see in the empirical world are imperfect copies of this ideal cat. Plato believed that the forms were arranged in a hierarchy. The most important form is the form of the good. Like the sun in the allegory of the cave, the good illuminates the other forms.

Aristotle's view of how knowledge is gained and where it can be obtained is rather different. To Aristotle the 'form' of something is what is found in the item itself, it does not represent something else. The form of something is its structure, and its characteristics, it can always be perceived by the senses.

Aristotle used the word 'substance' to express the material of which things are made of. For example, the substances of a table are: wood, nails and glue and the form of a table is: that it has 4 legs (usually), a flat horizontal surface etc... He believed that the cause of something can be traced back, showing several reasons of why it exists and he concluded that the explanation of things could be seen in four different ways. These are the four causes.

The first is 'the material cause', this answers the question, what is it made of? But material alone is not enough to make an object, e.g. the paints used to make a painting. The second cause is 'the efficient cause'; this is the agent which creates something about e.g. the painter of a painting. The third cause is 'the formal cause'; these are the characteristics that make the

object fit into 'a category'. E.g. the painting will fit into the category of a painting because it shares characteristics with other paintings. And the fourth cause is 'the final cause'; this is the most important of all causes. It is that all objects have an ultimate reason for existing. E.g. the painting's existence may be to create a beautiful, decorative object for people to admire and enjoy. He also believed that when an object has fulfilled its purpose, it has achieved goodness.

Plato's understanding of the body and soul is related to his ideas about duality; he thought of the existence in two levels. He believed that the human person also has different elements: the physical body, the mind and the immortal soul. The physical body is in a constant state of change, and therefore could not be a reliable source of truth. The soul however is immortal and unchanging so it can both know and be known. The mind is able to form opinions but it is also able to achieve awareness of the eternal truths beyond the physical world, in the world of the forms. Plato believed that the mind wants to understand ideas, to gain real knowledge of the forms, but the body is interested in sense pleasures, and it has needs such as eating and sleeping which are constantly getting in the way of gaining true knowledge.

So Plato saw the body as a nuisance and a blind, and believed that it wasn't the real person. The way that we speak of our bodies reflects this way of thinking. If we say 'I have a cat' we mean something entirely different from 'I am a cat'. 'I have a cat' means that I am separate from it, it is something that I own but it is not me. When we talk about our bodies we say 'I have a body' not 'I am a body'. This hints that a person is separate from their body. According to Plato, the soul is the directing force of the body and the mind. He compares the soul to a charioteer, in charge of two horses, the mind and the body. The soul tries to gather the two together, rather than allowing them to be pulled apart in opposite directions. Many people never achieve this direction; they allow their lives to be dominated by the bodily needs and pleasures.

Philosophers in contrast try to minimise their interests in bodily needs. They only eat and drink that is necessary and wear simple clothes as they are more interested in the soul. Plato believed that the soul is immortal. It exists before, during and after it is trapped in the body. It has to pre-exist the body because it is unchanging, so it cannot come into existence or go away again, it has to stay the same. The differences between the real knowledge grasped by the soul and the confused opinions gained by sense

perception are explained by Plato using the metaphor of the sight. He says that sight needs more than the eye. It needs an object to look at and also light. Without the light, the object cannot be clearly seen. He compared the light to the form of the good.

Aristotle's view of the body and soul is that the body is a 'living thing' and its soul is its 'form'. He believed that the soul is a much broader concept than the mind; the soul is the structure of the body, its function and its organisation. Souls are arranged in hierarchy e.g. a plant only has a vegetative type of soul. A human soul has a special addition to plant and animal souls; it has the power of reason.

Through the working of the soul people develop their intellects and ethical characters. For Aristotle, the body and soul are not two separate elements, they are one thing. The soul is not separable from the body because it is what makes the body a person, rather than just material. Therefore it cannot exist without the body e.g. on a wax stamp used to seal letters, the imprint cannot exist without the wax. Aristotle made it clear that the soul dies along with the body but he made an exception to the rule, all of the soul is inseparable from the body, with the exception of reason.

So as we can see, Plato and Aristotle's ideas were very different although they were great friends. Aristotle's ideas however prove to be more useful in the world today and explain a lot of things, whereas Plato's ideas may be seen as a bit far fetched and unrealistic. They are both wonderful people who have shaped the plan of learning for more than two thousand years, achieving so much it is hard to believe that it all came from two men.