

Some Steps Towards Overcoming the Distance
Between Aristotle and Kant: Part II

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Since Kant's theory of the soul (self or mind)¹ is very much an account of mental activity, activity which is constitutive of what is known, it is necessary to review briefly some main tenets of his Critical Philosophy. Kant begins by distinguishing three aspects of the human mind, i.e., the sensibility, the understanding, and reason. For Kant, only the sensibility and the understanding when taken together yield knowledge. That is, the only legitimate employment of the understanding is in categorically arranging what is given in intuition or through the sensibility. As for reason, its legitimate use, with regard to theoretical knowledge, is in systematic unification which at the same time affords us the greatest possible extension of our knowledge.² But, what we are interested in is the relationship between the sensibility and the understanding. For it is at this level that knowledge of objects is possible.

It is important to emphasize here a central theme in Kant's philosophy expressed in the words, "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."³ What Kant is drawing our attention to is a necessary or essential relationship between sense and understanding, one which makes possible the experience of objects as they appear to us. That is to say, representations (or what appears to us in experience) are possible only if two sets of conditions are present, namely, those of the sensibility and the understanding. Furthermore, it is to open one's philosophy to serious problems if either is emphasized over the other. We need only recall the theories Kant criticized and which were reviewed in the opening remarks of a previous paper to see the problems that come from the over-emphasis of one aspect.⁴ The essential relationship between the two powers consists in their "union", Kant says, which is the condition for objects of experience.⁵ It is only of objects understood in this way that we may have knowledge. Kant therefore provides the further explanation; "We cannot think an object save through the categories; we cannot know an object of thought save through intuitions corresponding to these concepts."⁶

It should be stressed that, as expressed in the last quotation, knowledge for Kant consists of two elements, intuitions and concepts. The former, by themselves do not afford knowledge of objects any more than do the concepts (categories), taken by themselves. This is not to say that in order to have knowledge an object must be represented here and now for this would imply the impossibility of

mathematics and pure science of nature. This would mean that all of our knowledge is derived and dependent upon the particular object. And that this is not his view Kant makes very clear in the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*; "In order of time...we have no knowledge antecedent to experience...But though all our knowledge begins with experience it does not follow that it all arises out of experience."⁷ In other words there are elements brought to experience by the knowing subject. Up to this point it has been these elements that we have been discussing. These elements, in so far as they have an empirical employment are constitutive of the object represented to us. The elements brought to experience by the knowing subject are the conditions for the object to be represented to us and therefore are a priori. The result of this function of the sensibility and the understanding is empirical knowledge of which only certain aspects may be determined before experience. These predetermined aspects are none other than the forms of intuition (space and time) and the categories which determine the combination of the manifold of intuition.⁸ Since they are the conditions for objects in general, they apply to any particular object given in intuition.

Taken in their pure form intuition and understanding are conditions of objects in general and therefore give rise to a priori bodies of knowledge such as mathematics and a pure science of nature. However, we are concerned with the constitutive role that intuition and understanding have in the experience of an object rather than the sciences rendered possible by these conditions of experience.

We are, by now, at the point where we may begin our comparative treatment of Kant and Aristotle. One thing that should not be forgotten as we proceed is that no reduction of one philosopher to the other is being attempted.

From the sketch of Kant's theory one of the important aspects to be recalled is that for Kant, knowledge consists of the union of two elements. Indeed, these two elements, if separated, constitute nothing knowable to our minds. For Kant, even the mere recognition that there are two aspects to knowledge presupposes their union. When we distinguish among the elements of something our task is analytical. We are analyzing something into its components. But the ground that makes possible this very analysis is a synthesis. That is, analysis presupposes a synthesis. As Kant explains, "where the understanding has not previously combined it cannot dissolve."⁹

We may stop and ask here whether or not there is something parallel in Aristotle. Of course, I suggest there is; however alert we may remain to the differences. We may, to begin with, notice a rather superficial resemblance of Kant's theory of the priority of the synthetic unity to, I believe, one of Aristotle's most important doctrines, the distinction between actuality and potentiality. The resemblance between the two lies in the priority placed on what actually is. In Kant, synthesis is prior to analysis as the condition for the latter. In Aristotle's

philosophy, actuality is ultimately prior to potentiality.¹⁰ Admittedly this seems quite superficial and it may be criticized that since Kant's synthetic unity is transcendental whereas Aristotle's actuality/potency distinction is a metaphysical principle, hence transcendent, then there is left no ground on which to discuss any alleged resemblance between the two. However, this is not the extent or the depth of the parallel.

Consider now Aristotle's theory of actuality and potentiality. It was in order to account for change without implying that being was coming from non-being. And, as we have noted above, this explanation is metaphysical, consisting of principles which apply to objects which exist externally to and independent of us. Kant would argue quite the opposite, that we may have no knowledge of entities that are not objects of possible experience. This radically restricts human knowledge. In Kant's view, what is not given in intuition and not thought in terms of the categories of the understanding is either "impossible, or at least would be nothing to me."¹¹

As is well known Aristotle held that we have knowledge of a host of things existing independently of us. Yet, if we reflect for a moment we will find, I believe, that the common interpretation of Aristotle is not so clear and simple as we are lead to believe. The interesting developments arise in Aristotle's treatment of knowledge. But, before we can examine Aristotle's account of knowledge we must review some of his basic principles. Like the ideas of other great thinkers the many elements which make up Aristotle's philosophy are so integrated that in order to understand one we must refer to others. The three central doctrines of Aristotle are those of substance, and the two distinctions of actuality/potentiality, and matter/form. The two sets of distinctions can only be understood in connection with Aristotle's notion of substance.

A substance, for Aristotle, was the individual entity, be it a particular stone, tree, animal or man. In this theory, Aristotle stood in contrast to the theories that argued that the real was something formal, something common to several entities. Substance conceived in this way was either material, e.g., Thales water, or 'spiritual', e.g., Plato's forms. Aristotle, however, subscribed to neither of the above theories. A substance for Aristotle was the individual entity, existing in the world with a career of its own. This does not mean, however that Aristotle had no appreciation for the conceptions that had come before. For another essential feature of Aristotle's doctrine was the distinction between matter and form. True, a substance was for Aristotle the real entity. However, two aspects could be discerned in the individual unity that a substance is, i.e. the matter and the form. To put it simply, form can no more exist apart from matter than can matter exist apart from form. The only way in which matter and form are separable is in thought.¹² Matter, for instance is now knowable in itself.¹³ Yet we are quite certain that since

the form, which tells us that something is "of such a kind"¹⁴ is general, there must be some other principle that is the source of individuation. This other principle can only be matter.¹⁵

The last of the three main doctrines of Aristotle's theory is the distinction between actuality and potentiality. We have already come across this distinction in connection with Kant's conception of synthetic unity. The distinction, as we have mentioned, was concerned with how change was possible without implying that being came from non-being. In short, a particular substance could not become other than what it is, at present, actually is unless the substance was already potentially other than what it is. For instance, in considering a particular substance, say, an acorn, we could assert that what this substance actually is, is an acorn. However we may also assert that what is actually an acorn is at the same time, potentially an oak tree.¹⁶

Now, with regard to the interrelatedness of the three doctrines we should recall that the matter/form distinction presupposed substance. As for the actuality/potency distinction, its meaningful application is also to substance. Furthermore, Aristotle draws a correspondence between matter and potency and form and actuality.¹⁷ In any understanding of how change takes place in a substance four factors will now be involved. Our acorn, for example, can develop into an oak tree only because a substance, which we understand as matter in the form of acorn, may come into the form of a oak tree. Furthermore, given the substance that it is, its *whatness* sets limits and determines the forms that it may come into. It is not of the nature of the substance we have been discussing to become other than an oak tree (or at most some wooden artifact). It is not of the nature of an acorn to develop into an automobile.

Like Kant, Aristotle believed that sense experience was an essential element of human knowledge. In a summary of his thoughts on the soul, Aristotle says that it is impossible to "learn or understand anything in the absence of sense."¹⁸ He even claimed that speculative thought required images which resemble objects given through the senses, without the matter.¹⁹ That there is a similarity between the two philosophers on this point hardly needs mentioning. However, the similarity will be more striking if we examine the theories more closely.

Aristotle says of the "faculty of sensation" that it has only potential existence.²⁰ Clearly, Aristotle is here presupposing the distinction between actuality and potency. Remember, also, that it is only when the potentialities of some things have been realized that it can be considered to have come into its final form; that is, become fully actualized. Now in the case of the faculty of sensation, its true form is to function as the means by which we may experience sensible objects. And, only when the faculty of sensation is engaged with a sensible object is its potentiality to sense objects brought into complete actuality. In a few words,

only when this "faculty" is actually functioning as it is supposed to function can it be that faculty.

So far, we have described only what takes place with the observer. However, as far as the object is concerned, in connection with the observer it has passed from a potentially sensible object to an actually sensible object. But it must be emphasized that this further completion of the object did not and could not take place independent of an observer. Moreover, to the extent that a sensible object was actualized as a sensible object, an observer was actualized as an actually sensing subject (a subject, whose faculty of sensation had attained to actuality). Indeed, the argument comes down to the claim that the observer and the observed share in the same actuality.²¹

In Kant the same is true, in so far as any object that appears to us in experience must be given through the forms of intuition, i.e., space and time. That space and time are the determinations of an object that may appear to us is not the point we are interested in. What interests us here is simply that Kant believed that objects which appear to us must be determined in some way by the observer. Additionally, when we emphasize the fact that in Kant's theory an object was not an object and could not possibly be an object for us unless it was determined in intuition²², the parallel to Aristotle becomes evident. For in Aristotle, as in Kant, the object is not a sensible object (Aristotle) or an appearance (Kant) unless it is actualized as such in a subject. The parallel may be further drawn out. It is significant that in Kant's account of the forms of intuition as the a priori conditions for experience he cautions us that although the forms of intuition (and for that matter, the categories of the understanding) are a source of a priori knowledge, nothing would be possible unless the entire situation were initiated in experience.

As we hopefully can see, from all that has gone before, Kant's forms of intuition are the forms *of* (objects as they appear to us) and therefore have no legitimate application except in regard to appearance. Once again, the forms of intuition are forms *of*, and taken in and of themselves (as pure forms) present us with no object. Space and time, then, when actually determining an object in experience have realized their function as forms or become actualized, as Aristotle might say.

Our examination of the parallel lines of thought in Aristotle and Kant may further be extended by moving to the level of thought or understanding. In both philosophers this level is characterized not by a mere intuitive awareness of an object sensibly given, but by knowledge of the object. However, this knowledge is not isolated from its source at the level of sensibility. In fact, to use the terminology of both philosophers the relationship between the sensibility and thought is analogous to that between matter and form.²³

Considering Kant's position first we find that he refers to this level of

understanding. Taking what was said above in connection with the understanding, we find that knowledge consists in the unity of the sensibility and the understanding. I believe that this bears a resemblance to the distinction between matter and form. However, I will try to indicate some points that are not so obvious in order to make the resemblance a bit more clear. Perhaps in this way resemblances to the other Aristotelian notions will be made to stand out and thus the general resemblance made more plain.

In Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* there is a section entitled "The Application of the Categories to Objects of the Senses in General."²⁴ Therein Kant discusses the categories of understanding in a way that is suggestive of the opposition between matter and form. The categories are described as "mere forms of thought" which determined the combination or "synthesis of the manifold of sensible intuition."²⁵ Kant's own expression is especially interesting since it reveals that the connection between thought and sense resembles the relation of form to matter, i.e., a relation wherein both elements are the essential constituents of the object known and that either element is separable from the other only in abstraction. Recall that, in Kant, the object known can only be such if it is presented in the forms of intuition, and is further conditioned by the concepts of the understanding. Or, just the same, we may infer that the understanding determines the sensibility which, in relation to the former, is determinable.²⁶ Here again, the Aristotelian distinction between matter and form comes to the fore. This is so, I believe, for in Aristotle what is determinable is matter in so much as matter is that aspect of an individual object which can "come to its form."²⁷ The distinction between actuality and potency also enters into the account for to the extent that the object yet consists partly of matter it is potentially other than what it is and may be further determined in its form. Likewise, in Kant, the sensibility, in so far as it is actually representing an object determined through the forms of intuition, is further determinable by the understanding. The object as mere appearance is only potentially an object of knowledge until that object is also thought in accordance with the categories of the understanding and thus brought to actuality as a genuine object of knowledge. In fine, it may be said of the constituents of experience revealed by Kant's analysis that, as in Aristotle, there are two elements: the intuitive, answering to the role of designating the *thisness* of the object known, and the conceptual which determines the *whatness* of the object known.

We have covered only a small portion of the complete theories of the mind's work generated by Kant and Aristotle. In both philosophers the accounts of mental activity go beyond the role of sensibility and the connection between sense and thought. However, to go into these would require a lengthy discussion of a number of key differences between Aristotle and Kant. Although, such an examination could indeed be connected with this outline it would extend this paper beyond its

scope which was to emphasize the resemblances and draw parallels. It is hoped that at least that much has been accomplished.

By outlining the parallels above we have not aimed at reducing Kant to Aristotle. Neither have we shown (nor tried to show) that Aristotle anticipated Kant. Along such lines as these, I have tried to show that in Aristotle's philosophy a model was provided; one perhaps the value of which Kant recognized and employed in his reasoning. But the significance of this goes deeper. For, what I've been concerned to show is that of all the theories that tried to account for the knower-known relationship, so many fail because the authors of such theories refuse to give equal status to each aspect of the relationship. Both Aristotle and Kant are at pains to avoid this mistake and both have given profound and remarkably similar analyses of the relationship. It has therefore been my purpose to bring the two closer together, remembering all the while that an ultimate reconciliation may not be at hand. However, the drawing of parallels reveals in Aristotle and Kant something, I believe, that is important. I have not tried to suggest that "all things are continuing exacting as from creation's beginning", including thought. There is I believe a genuine philosophic principle at work in the thought and attitudes of Kant and Aristotle; it is that being does not come from not-being, nor does knowledge come from total ignorance. The conditions which make possible all things whether being or experience are already present, in a sense, waiting to be actualized. Unlike so many, Kant and Aristotle did not forget this principle.

NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, N. Kemp Smith trans. (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1965), B428, B520, B700.
2. *Ibid.*, B750.
3. *Ibid.*, B75.
4. See my "Some First Steps in overcoming the Distance Between Aristotle and Kant," 1983 meeting of the N.M.W.T. Philosophical Society.
5. Kant, B75.
6. *Ibid.*, B165, sec. 27.
7. *Ibid.*, B1.
8. *Ibid.*, B153.
9. *Ibid.*, B130.
10. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1049b5, (Ross trans.).
11. Kant, B132.
12. Cf. Melbourne Evans, *The Physical Philosophy of Aristotle* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1964), p. 25.
13. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1036a8, (Ross trans.).
14. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1033b23-24, (Tredennick trans.).
15. *Ibid.*, 1033 b 12, 19, 21. Also, compare Richard Hope's rendering of this passage in his translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Also, see W.D. Ross, *Aristotle*, p. 169.
16. Cf. Aristotle *Physics* 201 a 20, (Hope trans.).
17. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1050 a15-16.

18. Aristotle *On the Soul* 432a6, (Smith trans.).
19. Aristotle *On the Soul* 432a10, (Hett trans.).
20. *Ibid.*, 417 a9.
21. *Ibid.*, 425 b25.
22. Kant, B62.
23. Cf. Aristotle *On the Soul* 431 a16, and Kant, B118.
24. Kant, B 150.
25. Kant, B150-151.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1050 a15.'