

# Why Aristotle May Not Be Considered A Materialist

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*Knowledge is not a product of hyper-intellectual imagination. Knowledge is that which distinguishes reality from illusion for the benefit of all.*

*Bhagavat Purana 1.1.2 describes this as the highest truth.[1]*

*"The human understanding is no dry light, but receives an infusion from the will and affections; whence proceed sciences which may be called "sciences as one would." For what a man had rather were true he more readily believes. Therefore he rejects difficult things from impatience of research; sober things, because they narrow hope; the deeper things of nature, from superstition; the light of experience, from arrogance and pride, lest his mind should seem to be occupied with things mean and transitory; things not commonly believed, out of deference to the opinion of the vulgar. Numberless in short are the ways, and sometimes imperceptible, in which the affections color and infect the understanding."*

*Francis Bacon, Novum Organon (1620)*

The following essay presents in my humble opinion why Aristotle may not be considered a materialist. He described the appearing (apparent) world or phenomenal cosmos teleologically as intrinsically a kingdom of ends, rather than mechanistically as a chaos impelled to form a cosmos by forces under laws externally acting upon its matter or content.

A teacher writes the alphabet on a blackboard to teach it to first graders, but it does not mean that the teacher is at the level of the first graders. Aristotle taught the principles of material phenomena, but one may not thereby conclude that he was a materialist.

Modern science assumes the *principle of uniformity* of matter throughout the universe in the form of atoms or subatomic particles, as well as universal laws and forces. This is a convenient simplification for a finite, limited intellect, especially convenient for utilizing formal mathematical interpretations of material phenomena, but Carl Sagan sagely reminds us,

"Common sense works fine for the universe we're used to, for time scales of decades, for a space between a tenth of a millimeter and a

few thousand kilometers, and for speeds much less than the speed of light. Once we leave those domains of human experience, there's no reason to expect the laws of nature to continue to obey our expectations, since our expectations are dependent on a limited set of experiences." [2]

Einstein also admonished us,

"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."

As will be explained, Aristotle did not make this assumption of universal homogeneity in his concept of the cosmos. In the English language we have one word to represent the concept of "Being," but in German there is a distinction made between "Sein" and "Dasein," or "Being" and a specific kind of 'determinate Being.' For example, we may speak of 'human being' as a type of being distinguished from other kinds of being. This finer distinction is found in human culture and reason. In India the abstract *advaitin* philosophers consider Being to be indeterminate or homogeneously indifferent. *Dvaitins* and others consider it heterogeneous and differentiated, while more inclusive and comprehensive philosophers consider it both simultaneously uniform and differentiated (*acintya bedha abedha*).

Aristotle explained reality in its entire scope as a non-homogeneous unity or whole: as matter-form in its sublunary, and celestial regions, in which the sublunary region consisted of non-homogeneous elements such as earth, water, fire and air, while the celestial consisted of features such as thought and desire. Beyond the celestial sphere was the soul and the psychological realm, and beyond that the ultimate divine arena he called *theos*, theology or God. The fact that he also explained what we call the material region of things does not mean that he was therefore a materialist. It would seem that such an opinion fails to recognize either his actual explanation of matter-form [hylomorphism], or the rest of his philosophy concerning the other aspects of total reality such as soul and God, all of which constituted the heterogeneous unity-in-difference of his entire speculative system. Hegel clearly recognized this in Aristotle and defended him against the charge of materialism.[3] He also emphasized the term 'Concept' or 'Conception' [German: *Begriffe*] to describe at a certain level Aristotle's notion of matter-form.

The form of a thing is what it is capable of doing or being. A leg is capable of being used for standing or walking. A hand detached from the body is therefore not a hand in that sense. The form is more like the animating soul. Therefore Aristotle says that if an eye were an individual its soul would be sight. He understands matter-form as hylomorphic in its inner functional [purposeful] and not merely structural sense. This intrinsic activity (*entelechia*) immediately places it outside the framework of the materialistic and mechanistic perspective.

Knowledge of what a thing does and knowledge of how it does it are different. What a radio does is to broadcast music, news, and so on. How it does it requires understanding electronics and electro-magnetic waves. A computer can do calculations, word processing, play chess, operate a robot, and so on. How it does it requires detailed electrical engineering knowledge, as well as knowledge of programming. The point is that there are different types of knowledge. Knowledge is heterogeneous.

Aristotle considers matter in itself (*what it is*) to be unknowable because its intelligibility lies in its form or actuality (act). Prime matter is pure potentiality (*dunamis*) for Aristotle and thus does not actually exist. Although the living body is made of earth, water, fire and air it cannot be produced merely from those elements. It is only by those elements in a particular form for the sake of which they exist that produces a living body/being. Earth in the form of a living body is different from earth outside such a body that does not exist for the sake of a living body. Aristotle gives the example of a hand when detached from the body can no longer be considered a hand since it has lost its function. A mechanical hand is not made of the same matter-form as the hand of a living body, just as a car or wheelchair may serve for transportation of the living body, but it is not constituted with the same matter-form as legs. An artificial heart can serve as a pump outside the body as well as within it. Thus it is not the same matter-form as found in a living body since it exists for the sake of itself as a pump rather than as an integral part for the sake of the living body.

The matter-form of the living body is intrinsically nutritive, reproductive, and irritable, while mechanical devices, whose forms/purposes are imposed upon them externally, are not. The form of matter is determined by the form of which it is the matter. Thus the nature of matter is dependent upon and determined relative to the form. In this way food is nutritive because it has

similar nutritive nature in it. This is not found in manufactured or purely chemical products, which on their own cannot sustain life. Food is much more than just chemicals. This fact is also accepted in the conception of the *Bhagavat purana* 1.13.47) where it is explained that life requires life for its sustenance - *jivo jivasya jivanam*. We could never live on chemically manufactured 'food.'

Form is the principle of determination which accounts for the thing being the kind of thing it is. Matter is the principle of potentiality - that which is capable of becoming other than what it is, while form is the principle of actuality, of the thing being the sort of thing it is. In natural things the arrangement of parts is what members of a species have in common; it is the reason that they belong to the same species. The substantial form is the cause of this arrangement; and the soul is the substantial form for living things. Aristotle, thus, is not a materialist in that he believes things cannot be reduced to their atomic constitution. Rather, Aristotle appeals to the intrinsic formal cause to account for the reason the material constituents are arranged in patterns appearing in the phenomenal world.

Likewise Aristotle considers substance to be a unity of form and matter [hylomorphism]. The form is the kind of substance it is, and the matter represents its potential for change. The term 'matter' as used by Aristotle is not the name for a particular kind of stuff, nor is it a name for the ultimate constituents of bodies such as atoms. Aristotle rejects atomism as too much of an abstraction from Nature or natural science. It is like examining the trees without ever being able to connect them to the forest. He likewise rejects the numerology, arithmology and the theology of the Pythagoreans (which he considers abstractions from dynamic actuality, a reality that is not reified matter which he considers an abstract concept as well).

Aristotle rejects the claim that matter is a substance, because that would mean it could exist independently on its own without form.[4] Aristotle's well known four aspects of cause or explanation of things inseparably integrate matter and form as well as the essential and instrumental unity in things. While he accepts the unity and order of the cosmos, he does not accept its uniformity - an assumption of modern science that Aristotle rejects because it is a totally abstract universality that has nothing to do with concrete reality as he understands and experiences it. The four elements earth, water, fire and air, as well as the fifth element of the celestial region, and

furthermore the divine plane of absolute existence, are non-reductively different in form and matter and thus occupy different realms. In the absolute plane, *Nous*, thought thinking thought, where the matter or content of thought/form is thought itself, matter is conceived as the concept Being in the identity-in-difference of Thought and Being. We also find this in Descartes original *cogito sum*, which he later disregarded in his differentiation of cognition from extension to the neglect of their identity.

A similar conception of a variety of fundamental elements is found in Samkhya philosophy, although in Samkhya the different elements are products of the three modes or *gunas* which may be interpreted in more psychological moods/terms. Although considered materialistic, Samkhya conceives a non-uniform cosmos that is different from the formal (abstract) materialism of modern atomic science. Samkhya is more properly considered dualistic since it differentiates *prakriti* (matter) from *purusha* (person).

The final cause, according to Aristotle is that for the sake of which motion occurs. In this sense there is no inactive matter that needs an external force of attraction or repulsion to move it. Motion is intrinsic to the teleologically infused matter-form. In the ultimate truth there is the one full actuality of God where matter or potentiality is dissolved into perfect and eternal actuality. The true Form of Aristotle's philosophy can be properly conceived when his various books are seen as a systematic unity of heterogeneous parts.

### **Notes:**

[1] A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, *Srimad Bhagavatam* (1987)

[2] Tom Head, *Conversations with Carl Sagan*, (2006), p 61.

[3] A. Ferrarin, *Hegel and Aristotle* (2004)

[4] Christine Korsgard, *Two Kinds of Matter in Aristotle's Metaphysics* (unpublished paper).