Plato Versus Aristotle

Plato was from a wealthy Athenian family and did not take life seriously until he met Socrates, who taught him that the path to wisdom was rational (use of logic) contemplation (deep thought), and that being a philosopher was the highest form of life. Plato taught his Students that all of us want to be part of something higher, a reality in which the world we see is only a small part, and which unites everything into a single harmonious (work together) whole.

Aristotle, however, grew up in a family of Greek physicians. He learned early on the value of observation and hands-on experience, not focusing on theory as Plato did, but instead on the real world. “Facts are the starting point” of knowledge, Aristotle wrote. So instead of accepting his teacher’s belief in pure contemplation, Aristotle said our path to knowledge comes through a methodical (step by step) discovery of the world around us—and the facts that make it up.


The entire history of Western civilization has been the great struggle between these two ways of seeing the world, and that includes not just in every society, but within ourselves: the constant tension between our inner Plato and inner Aristotle; discussing theory, ideals, and what we think should be versus looking at evidence, applying that to what actually occurs, and understanding reality. For Plato, thought experiments and reasoning would be enough to "prove" a concept or establish the qualities of an object, but Aristotle dismissed this in favor of direct observation and experience.

The divide between Plato and Aristotle is most obvious when it comes to their views on ethics. Plato believed that knowledge is virtue (morally good), in and of itself. This means that to know the good is to do the good, i.e., that knowing the right thing to do will lead to one automatically doing the right thing; this implied that virtue could be taught by teaching someone right from wrong, good from evil. Aristotle stated that knowing what was right was not enough, that one had to choose to act in the proper manner—in essence, to create the habit of doing good. This definition placed Aristotelian ethics on a practical plane, rather than the theoretical one espoused by Plato.

Plato felt that the individual should incorporate his or her interests to that of society in order to achieve a perfect from of government. His book, The Republic, described a utopian (perfect / non-existent) society where each of the three classes (philosophers, warriors, and workers) had its role, and governance was kept in the hands of those deemed best qualified for that responsibility, those of the "Philosopher Kings." The tone and viewpoint is that of an elite class or group taking care of those that lack the ability to do so, because the elites were wise and would make better choices about how to care for others in society.

Aristotle said that man was a political animal by nature and thus could not avoid the challenges of politics. In his view, politics functions as an organism (living and changing), and the role of the polis was not justice or economic stability, but to create a space where its people could live a good life and perform beautiful acts. Although avoiding a utopian solution, Aristotle moved beyond theory to become the first political scientist, observing political processes in order to formulate improvements.