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Aristotle on the Form of the Good

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When urged to examine the notion of Universal Good as illustrated by Plato's Form of the Good, Aristotle begins on a modest, almost apologetic tone. The irony of criticizing the work of one's friends within the Ethics, a treatise on morality, was certainly not lost on him. Yet, as paraphrased by "*Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*", he dissects the Form of the Good for the love of truth [1096a15]. In this paper, I will examine his criticisms to evaluate their merits.

The Categories and the Categories Argument:

The Categories is a work that captures Aristotelean views on ontology and predication. Ontologically, Aristotle says that "Being is said of in many ways" (Metaph. IV.2). The ten categories [1b25], presumably, enumerate this multivocity by listing the fundamental kinds of things that can exist:

Category	Examples
Substance	individual man
Quality	two cubits
Quantity	white
Relation	double
Where	in the market
When	yesterday
Being arranged	lying
Having on	wearing clothes
Doing	cooking
Being affected	being cut

¹ Excluding References

Within the categories, Substance is said to be ontologically superior. This work also enumerates the relationships between subjects and predicates in a proposition through constructs as ‘said of’ and ‘predicated in’.

Aristotle considers the Good to be spoken of in as many ways as Being [1096a23]. The meaning of ‘good’ varies significantly in each category. For example, Good in substance is God or the Mind, Good in quality is to possess the right virtues and Good in quantity is the correctly measured amount. If the same sense of Good manifests in all goods, as stipulated by Plato, Aristotle expects it to be predicated on a single category and not on all of them [1096a29].

The “itself” Argument:

The Platonists subscribe to the so-called “One over Many Argument” which hypothesizes the independent existence of a single Form for particulars that possess the same name [Rep. 596a]. For example - there exists a Chair Itself for all chairs. Aristotle disagrees with this reification on two counts:

- The human being and the Human Being Itself share the same definition of their essence - “man/woman” - without any differentiation being noticeable [1096b1].
- Plato’s Forms are eternal while their particulars change and decay over time [Phaedo 79d2]. However, Aristotle points out that White Itself, despite being eternal, will not be any whiter than a white particular [1096b4]. Similarly, Good Itself will not be superior in its goodness due to its eternal nature.

Hence, Aristotle sees no purpose in invoking the Form Itself when sensual particulars are capable of providing the same account of being.

Two sorts of Goods:

Aristotle argues that it is unsustainable for a single Idea of Good to subsume all particulars of good that span all categories. A Platonist might respond by delineating two types of goods [1096b8] - (i) those that are good in their own right and (ii) those that merely serve a purpose, i.e. are good in a derivative sense. Presumably, the Form of the Good only concerns and subsumes goods in the former class. Aristotle examines this suggestion by introducing four goods that might be considered as absolute goods [1096b16] - practical wisdom, sight, some types of pleasure and honor. If it emerges that such goods are also pursued for the sake of something else, then it

would reduce the Form of the Good to solely subsume itself, by the objection of *ad absurdum* [1096b20]. Alternatively, if these remain absolute goods which are subsumed by the Form of the Good, Aristotle expects them to exhibit the same sense of goodness [1096b23]. However, these goods offer different accounts of goodness - for example, good in practical wisdom might be possessing forethought while good in sight might be keenness in vision. Aristotle poses the dilemma that with or without this new classification, the argument for the Form of the Good remains unsustainable.

Are goods homonymous by chance?

Aristotle introduces homonyms in the Categories as things that have a common name but offer a different account of their being [Cat. I.1]. Aristotle's assertion that goods are not homonymous by chance [1096b27] suggests that there are other things that are homonymous solely by linguistic chance. Indeed, words such as key, crane and club have homonyms that have completely unrelated definitions. However, it does not seem plausible that "good" is homonymous in a similar way, as that would render any conversation involving "goodness" rife with misunderstanding and confusion. Yet, as one is able to have meaningful conversations about goods in different categories, it suggests that despite giving different accounts of goodness, all good things are related to some central reference. Aristotle does not identify this relation, but suggests three alternatives [1096b26-29]:

- All goods derive from a common good. For example, healthy food and healthy habits are derived from healthy living.
- All goods contribute to a primary good.
- Goods are good by analogy. For example, good for the body is sight, similarly good for the soul is understanding.

Is the Form of the Good useful?

Having questioned the theoretical plausibility of the Form of the Good, Aristotle proceeds to question its practical applicability to the study of Ethics. Hypothetically, if one assumes the existence of the Form of the Good as stipulated by Plato, Aristotle does not consider it achievable through human actions [1096b34], rendering it useless for practical sciences. Alternatively, the Form of the Good could represent a pattern common to all goods. Knowing this pattern would

aid one to recognize the good in all things [1097a2]. However, this is at odds with practical sciences as none of them seem concerned with the Forms for their day-to-day functioning [1097a6]. If the knowledge of the Forms is such a vital aid, it seems unbelievable that no craftsman or expert is even searching for it. Even if the expert learns about the Form of the Good, his concerns rest chiefly with the immediate particular at hand.

Evaluate Aristotle's account:

Despite questioning and discarding vital tenets of Plato's doctrine, Aristotle's criticisms are neither too sharp nor emphatic; in fact he begins on an almost mournful tone [1096a13]. An inner affinity with Plato and his works seems evident in the tone and structure of his arguments.

Among his arguments, I consider the 'Categories argument' to be the strongest [1096a25]. The claim that good resonates in different ways from different particulars strongly questions the kind of unity advocated by Platonism. According to Aristotle, Plato's mistake was to ignore homonymy by assuming that all things bearing the name of good are good the same way. Plato could have responded to this argument by expanding on how a particular 'partakes' in a Form. It is conceivable that the nature of this relationship could vary across categories.

I find the 'itself argument' [1096a35] to be quite weak as Aristotle does not adequately explain how the Form and the particular offer the same account of being. A Platonist would immediately respond that sensually and epistemologically, the Form is superior to every material instantiation of it. Similarly, in an attempt to explain how good is spoken of [1096b27], Aristotle gives three alternatives, the first being that all goods are derived from a common good and the second being that all goods contribute towards a common good. It is not immediately evident why these alternatives should not be possible through the doctrine of the Forms. These alternatives are structurally similar to Platonic ideas, but fall short of explaining how they are different, if indeed they are.

Aristotle's criticisms against the Form of the Good are presented in the context of his current discussion on practical sciences, particularly ethics, and under the shadow of his framework of the Categories. He engages with facets of the doctrine of Forms where it most intersects with his current inquiry - such as the Universal Good. There are other aspects to the Form of the Good, such as it being the cause of all knowledge and being, that Aristotle has not explored in this passage. One wonders whether to consider it as rejection by omission, but that

does not seem consistent with Aristotle's methodical approach in this work. Hence, I believe that Aristotle's concern in this passage was not to spar comprehensively with the Forms, but instead to point out its deficiencies to the study of Ethics.

Aristotle's later views certainly bear a Platonic tilt. In the *Metaph.* VI, he introduces the idea of studying being qua being. He revises his original assertion on the multivocity of being by claiming that all senses of being are related to a central reference. He considers the study of this central reference - substance or its essence - to be First Philosophy. This revision lends him susceptible to the Science Argument where he claims that goodness can only be studied through multiple sciences and not one. However, it does not render the entire argument moot as Aristotelean essences do not appear to be completely separable and independent from their material instantiations.

References:

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