

Ontological Bases of the Universe in Plato's and Aristotle's Cosmologies

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Abstract: We firstly find traces of systematical and comprehensive thought related to existence of the universe in Plato and Aristotle. Plato, by the doctrine of ideas which is the basis of his whole philosophy, accepted that the objective world was to be composed of shadows, and he propounded that the essential was in ideal world. On the contrary, Aristotle has shaped his thoughts related to being by conception made individual substances as base, and he defended that Platonic idealism was only a conceptual structure and the truth was not composed of absolute forms or ideas but it was to be consist of indivisible unity of them. In this paper it will briefly be dealt with the bases of both conceptions.

Keywords: Theory of forms, being, the first matter, universe, substance, potentiality, actuality, reason.

Platon ve Aristoteles Kozmolojisinde Evrenin Ontolojik Dayanakları

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Özet: Evrenin varlığıyla ilgili sistematik ve kuşatıcı düşünce örneklerine ilk olarak Platon ve Aristoteles felsefelerinde rastlıyoruz. Platon, tüm düşüncesinin temeli olan idea öğretisiyle, nesnel dünyanın gölgelerden ibaret olduğunu kabul etmiş ve aslolan şeyin ideal dünyada olduğunu öne sürmüştür. Buna karşın Aristoteles, varlıkla ilgili düşüncelerini bireysel tözleri dayanak yapan bir anlayışla şekillendirmiş, Platoncu idealizmin yalnızca kavramsal bir yapı olduğunu ve gerçekliğin salt formlar ya da idealardan ibaret olmayıp her ikisinin ayrılmaz bütünlüğünden meydana geldiğini savunmuştur. Bu yazıda her iki görüşün temelleri kısaca ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İdealar kuramı, varlık, ilk madde, evren, töz, kuvve, fiil, neden.

1. Plato's Conception of the World Based on Forms

Plato's philosophy is accepted attempt of the first serious systematic philosophy. He has constituted the basis of his philosophy by *theory of forms* and constructed his all doctrine on this theory. According to him, forms represent the reality, and materials in this world consist of shadows.¹ Plato tries to arrive in the other world or the world of forms by making Socrates' notion into substance, and with reference to mathematical objects in the mind that can go beyond. The sensible world, for Plato, does not carry value due to a copy of the world of forms. "What is being *qua* being?" is placed to center of Plato's philosophy and it is said that being is the *form*. Plato has stated that this world was a stair, and that the relation to the life of the other world or *hades* was simply recollection of the soul.²

In Plato's philosophy forms have threefold significance those are ontological, teleological and logical. The ontological one represents *thing in itself* or form which is the real being. All things exist by participation in general ideas, that is, each thing is what it is only through the presence of the idea in it.³ Ideas or forms defined as essence or true existence of everything are "each of them always what they are, having the same simple self-existent and unchanging forms, not admitting of variation at all, or in any way, or at any time."⁴ According to Plato, the material world or *physis* whose reality can be comprehended by senses and desires but not by mind is a copy of the ideal world. Whereas the existence of the material world is composed of assumption or *doxa*, knowledge of the existence of the real is in the ideal world in where that reason for being happens. Comprehension of forms in the ideal world can only be realized by men who philosophize.⁵

¹ Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 5 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892, *Republic* 514^a ff.

² *Phaedo* 72^e.

³ *Phaedo* 100^c. See Eduard Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*, trans. R.L. Palmer, New York: Meridian Books, 1955, p. 149.

⁴ *Phaedo* 78^{c-d}.

⁵ *Republic* 474^{a-5}^b. See also *Epinomis* 992^c ff.

Plato's doctrine of forms, in opposition to fundamental materialist attitude of atomism and its rejection the truth, should be seen as endeavor to present what divine truth is.⁶ Whereas never do forms change, the phenomenal world continually changes. Plato tries to get through the problem of incompatibility between completeness of forms and incompleteness of phenomena by *hyle*, a matter which bears the traces of both sides. This matter is formless, invisible, the source of all others, the place in where that space and formation happen, and it takes the shape of everything that includes to it.⁷

Plato, with *hyle*, has meant a substance which filled this space and was entirely formless and lack of quality, but not absolute space. Although this formless substance was lack of all manners of being, Plato has not thought that it was nothingness such as an empty space. It represents disorder or *chaos*, for its quality is only changeable. Beings move from *chaos* to *cosmos* because of giving form by God. Pieces of this matter have constituted four elements by combining each other, and God has joined them together and has given soul all of them. But soul has been created no later than all creatures.⁸ God has given form the universe with molds of the world of forms and he has connected both world to each other through the formless matter.

By the time this shapeshifter object was perceived by who has faculty of perception, bodies come to realm of existence. Then, all things have generated in that way by changing and moving. Bodies exist so long as remain as are, whenever passing into another state then they are destroyed utterly.⁹ It is concluded that changing and moving bodies are not real beings due to be contrary to steadies of forms. Therefore, according to Plato, the reality of being has to be sought in remaining stable and never changing. Thus, it is understood why beings in this material world are not accepted the real.

⁶ See *Laws* 967^{a-c}.

⁷ *Timaeus* 48^e-53^c ff.

⁸ *Timaeus* 30^a-4^c.

⁹ *Laws* 894^a.

2. Aristotle's Conception of the Naturalist World

Aristotle who is accepted all time the greatest philosopher has examined what the study of *being qua being* was to mean, and he has entitled the science of being *prima philosophia* or the first philosophy.¹⁰ According to him, beings are not universal like Plato's forms but *individual substances* predicated categories on. In this respect, for Aristotle, being means to be a substance in a certain aspect. Substance, since it has an independent existence, is the reason for being of all things. According to Aristotle, if there were not substance then none of beings could come into being. Substance, the primarily category, is the reason for existence of categories because of becoming priority to them in every sense, that is, in definition, in order of knowledge and in time. Other categories none can exist independently, but only substance apart.¹¹ Priority of substance does not mean that it can be existed without them, yet any category is necessary to come into being for anything else. This does not mean that it can exist without them while they cannot exist without it. A substance with no quality is as impossible as a quality which does not presuppose a substance. Substance is the whole thing, including the qualities, quantities, relations, and so on, which occur its essence and this can exist except for.¹²

Aristotle has proposed that being had occurred from matter and form in respect of divisible, and this being is neither an absolute form as in Plato nor an absolute matter as in Democritus. Form and matter do not come into being themselves; beings are the unity which arises out of togetherness of matter and of form. While everything mentioned as the concrete beings is dependent on generation and corruption, form is not dependent on any corruption inasmuch as not independent on any generation. So, thing that exists is being of that thing but not its essence. Neither is definition nor is demonstration for individual sensible substances,

¹⁰ Aristotle, *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. David Ross, 12 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908-52, *Metaphysica* 1003^a20.

¹¹ *Metaphysica* 1028^b30-5 and *Categoriae* 2^b1-5.

¹² David Ross, *Aristotle*, London & New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 172.

because these substances have matter, and the nature of matter is contingency of to be or not to be. For this reason, all individual sensible substances are dependent on corruption.

According to Aristotle, there are also matter and form in the composition of elementary forces named four elements. The underlying nature of this matter is an object of scientific knowledge known by an analogy. “For as the bronze is to the statue, the wood to the bed, or the matter and the formless thing before receiving form to anything which has form, so is the underlying nature to substance.”¹³ Matters of perceptible bodies are inseparable from forms, and they are always bound up with a contrariety. It must reckon that matter is *originative source* and the primary or *substratum* which is potentially perceptible body.¹⁴

Speaking of the meanings of substance, Aristotle state that the first is matter, the second is form, and the third is compound of both matter and form. Matter is potentiality and form is actuality, “of the latter there are two grades related to one another as knowledge to the exercise of knowledge”.¹⁵ The relation of form to matter enables to changing such that in the world everything that includes matter and motion is bound to this changing. In fact, motion is actualization of that which is potentially.¹⁶ In existent neither does come to be form nor matter, since form has an eternal being. Forms become the eternal by way of successive beings including them. Referring to Platonic forms cannot explain anything to us in so far as form cannot indicate to a concrete being.

Aristotle tries to show that in each of the three modes of production, those are natural, artistic, and spontaneous. Firstly, describing the nature in this connection, Aristotle means it as the power that inherent in all living things, of initiating change, and of reproducing their kind. In natural becoming “everything that comes to be comes to be by some agency and from something, and

¹³ *Physica* 191^a10-5. Aristotle also appends another element called *aether* which constitutes the heaven and contains the air. *Physica* 212^b20.

¹⁴ *Generatione et Corruptione* 329^a25-35.

¹⁵ *De Anima* 412^a5-10.

¹⁶ *Physica* 200^b10 ff.

comes to be something".¹⁷ Secondly, in artistic production the pre-existence of form is less obvious. In this production that requires an actually maker is not necessary to come to an actually existent, that is, form of being exists in the mind of actually maker. Here, by form Aristotle means the essence of each thing and its primary substance. "For even contraries have in a sense the same form, for the substance of a privation is the opposite substance".¹⁸ Thirdly, spontaneous production is of two kinds of imitation or *mimesis*, one which imitates nature and other one which imitates art. An unskilled person may originate by accident the same treatment which a doctor would have prescribed on scientific grounds, and reproduction, which in the higher kinds of living thing requires sexual union, takes place in the lower spontaneously.¹⁹

Aristotle states that the actuality is prior to potency, nature also is in the same genus as potency, for it is a principle of movement. The actual is the end or *telos* to which potency points, and not the reverse of this. To all such potency, then, actuality is prior both in formula and in substantiality, and in time it is prior in one sense, and in another not. "Then, it is clear that actuality is in this sense also in order of generation and of time, prior to potency", for "the action is the end, and the actuality is the action".²⁰ Actuality is prior in a stricter sense also, for eternal things are prior in substance to perishable things, and no eternal thing exists potentially. The eternal is prior in nature to the perishable, and no eternal thing can exist potentially. For which has the potentiality of being has also the potentiality of not-being. Therefore, all the primordial entities in the universe are free from potentiality. God is in the fullest sense actual, since He is always what He is at any time, and has no element of unrealized potentiality. Form too is perfectly actual one. No specific form ever begins or ceases to be, it only comes to be actualized in fresh individuals. Even matter, though from one point of view it is potentiality, is free from the type of

¹⁷ *Metaphysica* 1032^a10-5.

¹⁸ *Metaphysica* 1032^b1-5.

¹⁹ *Metaphysica* 1034^a20-^b5. See Ross, *Aristotle*, p. 181.

²⁰ *Metaphysica* 1049^b5-50^a35.

potentiality, and it is eternal. Motion is not the potential, for everything is on the move eternally²¹.

For Aristotle, the motion is possible by dint of the mover, and so what moves itself has no possibility moving, in the final analysis, it must be the immobile what is reason of the motion.²² Forms are lack of the power of providing the movement and they are not the absolute actual. Since the motion provided by anything that has no such a power cannot be eternal, the prime reason of the motion must be the eternal substance that to keep going the motion necessarily. "There must, then, be such a principle, whose very essence is actuality. Further, then, these substances must be without matter, for they must be eternal, if anything is eternal. Therefore they must be actuality."²³

It is obvious that this substance is undoubtedly God who is the absolute form and the absolute actual. But, how can anything cause the motion without being moved? The physical causation of movement implies the mutual contact of the mover and the moved, and therefore a reaction of the moved on the mover.

Aristotle point out that there is something which provides the motion and there is also something which moves without being moved, being eternal, substance and actuality. The primary object of desire and of thought is the same thing. "Further, whether its substance is the faculty of thought or the act of thinking, what does it think of? Either of itself or of something else, and if of something else, either of the same thing always or of something different."²⁴ This is why the unmoved mover gives the motion to universe by *desire*. That is to say, "He causes the daily rotation of the stars round the earth. Since He moves by inspiring love and desire, it seems to be implied that the 'first heaven' has soul. And this is confirmed by statements elsewhere that the heavenly bodies

²¹ *Metaphysica* 1050^b5-1^b1. See also Ross, *Aristotle*, p. 184-5.

²² *Physica* 257^a30 ff. According to Aristotle, all natural motion is directed towards an end. *De Caelo* 217^a35.

²³ *Metaphysica* 1071^b10-25. Cf. Alfarabi, *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi, New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962, p. 102-3.

²⁴ *Metaphysica* 1072^a25-30.

are living beings.”²⁵ Because, Aristotle’s genuine and main view is that God or the prime mover does not affect the universe physically, for the prime mover is not in space.²⁶

Aristotle explains becoming and changing with four causes, each of these is “the form or the archetype, id est the statement of the essence, and its genera”. First is *material cause* that is substratum on which occurs changing. Second is *formal cause* that determines what something is. Third is *efficient cause* that corresponds to the origin of moving or changing, and that comes together in same individual. Fourth is *final cause* that gives the end to something.²⁷ Ross points out that of Aristotle’s causes only two, the efficient and the final, answer to the natural meaning of *cause*. We think of matter and form not as relative to an event which they cause but as static elements which analysis discovers in a complex thing. This is because we think of cause as that which is both necessary and sufficient to produce a certain effect.²⁸ But never keep in mind that Aristotle in fact regards the efficient and the final cause, two internal or constituent elements, as necessary condition.

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²⁵ Ross, *Aristotle*, p. 187.

²⁶ *De Caelo* 279^a20.

²⁷ *Physica* 194^b25-5^b5. See also *Metaphysica* 1013^b20-4^a25.

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