

*Founders of Western Philosophy: Thales to Hume*  
a 12-lecture course  
by

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**Lecture 4**  
**A REVOLUTION:**  
**THE BIRTH OF REASON, PART I**

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# Lecture 4

## A REVOLUTION: THE BIRTH OF REASON, PART I

### 1. “The Philosopher”

The history of philosophy has offered us, before tonight’s lecture, two basic alternatives: the Heraclitean/Sophist approach and the Pythagorean/Platonist approach. These two approaches have their characteristic positions in each branch of philosophy. In metaphysics, one side says that there is no objective reality. Nothing is, everything is becoming. The other side says, no, there are two realities: a true reality, which is non-material and superior to this one; and this imperfect, semi-real reflection in which we live. In epistemology, one side says that knowledge does not exist, only opinion. Man is the measure of all things, and one can say only “what seems to me now.” That is the skeptic viewpoint. The other side says, this is wrong, there is objective knowledge, which is gained by coming into contact not with the facts of this world, but with a superior dimension. In Plato’s view, you recall, this meant that you recollect the innate ideas you acquired in a previous life, and that ultimately you need a mystic insight into an ineffable principle. In ethics, one side gives us whim-worshipping subjectivism accompanied by the view that might makes right. The other says, no, ethics is objective. But it consists of turning away from life on earth, and (if you remember the quote from the *Phaedo*) practicing the profession of dying, and also (if you remember the *Republic* and the *Laws*) ruling men by force. Thus: No reality or two reali-

ties—skepticism or mysticism—whim-worshipping subjectivism or ascetic supernaturalism.

What, then, about the possibility of a philosophy that would advocate one reality, this one; that would say that objective knowledge is possible of this world, gained by logic operating on the evidence of the senses; that would say that there exists an objective ethics, and its standard is man's happiness on earth as an end-in-itself, to be achieved by being rational here in this life? Is there such a third alternative? You know, of course, that there is. There is one philosopher who lays down for the first time the fundamental basis for a rational philosophy, one that is neither skeptic nor mystic. That philosopher is Aristotle, our subject for the next two weeks.

When I began the lecture on Plato, I said that he was a great philosophic genius, on at least three counts: his originality, the depth and grandeur of his power of abstraction, and his capacity for systematic integration. I now wish to say the same things about Aristotle. He was as original as Plato, and even more so, in a way: Aristotle had no significant precursors in his approach to philosophy, whereas Plato had the Pythagoreans to set his overall direction (as well as the other pre-Socratics who contributed to his view). Before Aristotle, there was only Platonic mysticism, Sophistic subjectivism, and millenia of barbarism and ignorance. Also, Aristotle had as profound a capacity for philosophic abstraction as Plato, and, if you judge by the scope of his surviving works, an even greater capacity for systematic, all-encompassing integration.

But there is still another factor here; there is one crucial difference between Plato and Aristotle, beside their common originality, profundity, and power of integration. It is that Aristotle's philosophy, in its essentials, is *true*—which makes Aristotle a phenomenon without precedent in the history of thought. Dante many centuries later called Aristotle, "the master of them that know"; this was a simple statement of the exact truth. During the medieval period after Aristotle's thought was

rediscovered, he was characteristically referred to simply as “the philosopher.” This, also, was an exact statement, because if truth—I mean truth on essential, fundamental issues—is a vital part of philosophy, then Aristotle’s is the only philosophy. Aristotelianism is philosophy as a rational science, versus philosophy as a rationalization for subjective whims or mystic trances.

Aristotle in this sense is *the* philosopher. Whatever his errors (and he made many, as we will see), his system has been the foundation on which has been built every major human achievement ever since. Without Aristotle, the development of modern science, the Industrial Revolution, the creation of the United States of America—none would have been possible. As Ayn Rand has observed, the history of the West has been, in a certain way, a duel between Plato and Aristotle, across all the centuries. Whenever and to whatever extent Platonism was dominant, the results on earth were mysticism, regression, brutality, suffering. Whenever and to the extent that Aristotelianism was dominant, the results were reason, progress, freedom, human happiness.

Aristotle was born in 384 B.C. in Stagira, in Thrace, a colony in northern Greece, and he is often called “the Stagirite” after his birthplace. At the age of eighteen, he came to Athens and entered Plato’s Academy (remember, the first university in the Western world). He studied under Plato for about twenty years, until Plato’s death. During most of those years, judged by the evidence we have available, Aristotle was a whole-hearted Platonist. He believed in the world of Forms; he believed in the immortality of the soul and the wheel of birth; he believed that death was a release from the body, the soul then being able to go back to the perfect, unchanging world; he believed that knowledge was reminiscence; etc. In this period, he wrote a number of Platonic-type dialogues expounding these typical Platonist themes.

But Aristotle was not only a student of Plato; he was also Aristotle. He gradually came to question, one issue at a time,

Plato's views, and to reject them, developing finally his own philosophy in fundamental opposition to Plato's. In 335 B.C., he opened, in direct competition with the Academy, his own university in Athens, named the Lyceum. Since he characteristically instructed students by strolling back and forth with them in a covered walk called the "peripatos," Aristotelianism is frequently called "the peripatetic philosophy."

During his years at the school, he wrote an incredible number of treatises for his students, on all subjects then known, and on many subjects not known until he started them. He was one of the very few universal geniuses in human history. His works encompass physics, metaphysics, logic, epistemology, ethics, psychology, biology, rhetoric, theology, politics, esthetics, and more. Unfortunately, much of his writing was lost. Only a fraction remains; yet this fraction fills twelve volumes.

A word on his writings, in case you ever want to read them. Almost all of the works he wrote for the general public have been lost. So what we have today is largely notes that, we conjecture, he made for himself and his pupils, and did not intend for publication. Indeed, some people take the view, which has a certain plausibility, that the works we still have are written *by* Aristotle's students; they represent, in effect, class notes that were later compiled and ascribed to Aristotle. In any event, the works are telegraphic, highly technical, and difficult to read. Moreover, during centuries of copying them, various bits were added to them, and sometimes parts were pasted in the middle of a completely different subject and treatise, so that the order got all mixed up. For instance, elements of Aristotle's early Platonism periodically pop up in a mature work, and it makes hash out of the total volume. Generally, therefore, do not blame yourself if you find Aristotle difficult to read or untangle. It is not your fault, and it is not his fault. One effect is that Aristotle is particularly difficult to interpret in several cases; where such cases arise

in this course, although my presentation is generally the standard one, I will indicate that other possibilities of interpretation exist.

## **2. Preface: Essentials of Aristotle's Metaphysics**

All right, let us begin on Aristotle's thought. Our first subject this evening will be Aristotle's epistemology. But as preface, I must acquaint you with the essentials of his metaphysics, as a base to understand his epistemology.

The fundamental principle of Aristotle's metaphysics I have already named: There is one reality—this reality, the world we live in. In contrast to the Sophists, Aristotle believed that reality is objective and absolute; it is what it is independent of consciousness, of the thoughts, the hopes, or the wishes of anybody or of everybody. Also, of course, in contrast to Plato, it is anti-supernaturalistic. His view is sometimes called naturalism, a dubious term, but applicable if you understand it to mean that there is only this reality and no supernatural world, no world of Forms or of universals.

The arguments Aristotle offers against the Sophists we will see in due course. As for Plato's world of Forms, Aristotle's works contain a repeated polemic against it. I will give you just a sample, a few of his many arguments attacking Plato's world of Forms; they will begin to give you the flavor of Aristotle's approach to philosophy.

To begin with, Aristotle says, the Forms are useless as a theory because they do not explain this world. This world in which we live consists of particular things that move, change, and develop. How can we explain the events of this world by reference to another world consisting only of static universals? Yet this is the world, not some other world, that we want and need to understand. Therefore, he argues, Plato's supernatural world of Forms is a useless duplication. Down here we have shoes, ships, and cabbages, and Plato's idea of making sense of