

PLATONIC EPISTEMOLOGY, MATERIALISM, SKEPTICISM AND ANTI-RATIONALISM IN LIGHT OF ARISTOTELIAN EPISTEMOLOGY

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In epistemology, the study of knowledge, there are three theories on how to arrive at rational truth: materialism, spiritualism or Platonic epistemology, and Aristotelian epistemology. Materialism teaches that the human person acquires knowledge from the senses, i.e. the matter and energy one can taste, touch, feel, and this is an operation which somehow uses the brain. And man's knowledge is limited to the senses. No absolute spiritual truths. Directly opposite to this is spiritualism, or Platonic epistemology, which states that the human person knows the things that he/she knows by spiritual intelligence only and not from exterior senses. The Aristotelian theory of epistemology is the middle ground between Platonic and materialistic epistemology since it defines that "all of our knowledge comes from our senses, but we also have a spiritual ability which transcends the material and which we call intelligence which has the power to separate out the confused data of the senses, those things that are essential for some particular type of knowledge."¹ Furthermore, because Aristotelian epistemology provides an adequate balance for Platonic and materialistic epistemology, Pope Leo XIII revived it to confront the philosophical theory of Kant, anti-rationalism, and that of Hume, skepticism.



Materialism sought to explain rational truth to the Greek Stoics and Epicureans of the second and third centuries B.C. by limiting valid knowledge solely to the material since according to this kind of thinking, the material aspects of reality are what lead the human mind to all the truths possible. This kind of reasoning gave rise to Marxism and it still exists today in modern science and the minds of secularists. Aristotelian epistemology agrees with materialism in that as early as infancy, information indeed comes through the senses and the human person begins to acquire some kind of knowledge of the world. However, Aristotelian thinking goes further to point out that this "cannot be the whole explanation of human thought because [even though] all of our knowledge comes from the senses, we have an intellect, which is not material and which is able to transcend the level of the material world in order to get at what is essential in the material world and make scientific, critical knowledge possible."² From this point of view, Aristotle shows how through his branch of philosophy, one can come to answer ultimate questions on the rational level, find help in seeking understanding of the faith, and arrive at sound truth.

In contrast to materialism, spiritualism states that reality can only be known by spiritual intelligence, innate ideas of truth. The Greek philosopher Plato embarked on teaching spiritualism to reawaken the soul to the real world so as to be conscious that the truth lies within, not outside. Aristotelian epistemology, however, takes this interior search of the truth and explains that one does not begin by looking inside, for if one wants to discover one's deepest identity within, one will not find the answer solely by looking inside; it has to be done by seeing "the world around us and from our contrast with the world around us we come to understand ourselves."³ Therefore, Plato believed in introspection to arrive at truth whereas Aristotle "argued [that] natural science based on sense experience demonstrates the existence of a First Cause that is spiritual and of a human intelligence that is also spiritual, although it depends on the First Cause for its existence and requires the body and its senses to arrive at truth."⁴ Thus, Aristotle demonstrates how the body is placed at the service of the spirit.⁵ This, in turn, helps one to understand oneself and the surroundings, be able to interpret the Word of God, en flesh it in the daily, and be a beacon of light for the culture.

Before the growing trains of thought which opposed this balance of Platonic and materialistic epistemology, Pope Leo XIII revived the Aristotelian epistemological approach of St. Thomas Aquinas to confront the philosophical theories of anti-rationalism and skepticism of Kant and Hume, respectively. Immanuel Kant, an idealist philosopher of the late eighteenth century, "proposed a form of idealism that held that although we cannot know the material world in itself, we can form general scientific natural laws about it as hypotheses that fit our sense experiences."⁶ These hypotheses build a construction, however, which will never tell anything about reality. Therefore, this approach, similar to spiritualism, leaves one with the need to arrive at the truth of reality which St. Thomas Aquinas provides. In skepticism, on the other hand, the empiricist David Hume of the eighteenth century "claimed [that] the notions of cause and effect simply reflect our expectation that things will go on as usual, but they are not based on any sense data, since our senses only show us that one thing happens after another, not that one is the cause of the other."⁷ In contrast to Aristotelian epistemology, this theory, then, does not separate the essential from the irrelevant in a similar way that materialism fails to give the essence of things.

In conclusion, the Aristotelian epistemological approach to human experience provides an adequate starting

point to arrive at rational truth. From what one receives through the senses, one uses it to work up to an understanding of one's interior, one's spirit, and to the world around us so as to be coherent, responsible witnesses of the truth of the Gospel. May our Blessed Mother, the Seat of Wisdom, be the home and school for many hearts to arrive at a profound knowledge of the Word.

Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Lecture 3: Why Theology Has Difficulty with Modern Philosophy." 2000. International Catholic University.

2 Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Lecture 2: Why Theologians Must Choose an Epistemology." 2000. International Catholic University.

3 Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Lecture 2: Why Theologians Must Choose an Epistemology." 2000. International Catholic University.

4 Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Notes: Lecture 2: Choosing an Epistemological Approach to Human Experience." 2000. International Catholic University.

5 cf. Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Lecture 3: Why Theology Has Difficulty with Modern Philosophy." 2000. International Catholic University.

6 Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Notes: Lecture 3: The Intellectual Ambiguities of Contemporary Culture." 2000. International Catholic University.

7 Ashley O.P., Fr. Benedict. "Notes: Lecture 3: The Intellectual Ambiguities of Contemporary Culture." 2000. International Catholic University.

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