

LECTURE 5.1 – Aristotle’s Theory of Hylomorphism

Just as in Plato there is the Theory of Forms that summarizes the claims of Plato in his theory of reality, in Aristotle there is his **Theory of Hylomorphism** that will give you some understanding of the claims Aristotle is making in his theory of reality.

In this theory Aristotle (A) is trying to explain the essence of every natural body (included in natural body is the human being). In philosophy, essence of a thing refers to what makes the thing the kind of thing that it is (i.e., the what-ness of a thing).

Aristotle’s Theory of Hylomorphism:

NOTE: Hylomorphism was coined from ‘**hyle**’ (meaning matter) and ‘**morphe**’ (meaning form). [**Hyle + Morphe = Hylomorphism**] This is why this theory of A is also called the theory of **matter and form**. This is called a **dualist** view because it explains the essence of things by means of 2 principles (matter and form) as opposed to a **monist** view [that uses only one principle (hence, mono) to explain the essence of a thing].

This theory has only one claim. It says: Every **natural body** is made up of **2 essential principles: one**, an indeterminate and determining principle called **prime matter**; and **the other**, a determining and determinate principle called **substantial form**.

To understand this claim, we need to understand **4 key concepts in this claim: natural body, essence of a thing, prime matter, and substantial form**.

For A, **natural body** is the opposite of **manufactured things** (like tables, chairs, cars, chalk, etc.). So a natural body is a being that already exists even before we manufactured or produced things. In other words, it is not made by humans; rather, it already there when we begin to exist. That is why it is called ‘**natural body**.’ For A, there are **4 kinds of natural bodies: human beings, animals** (i.e., non-human animals), **plants**, and **non-living bodies** which A calls ‘**minerals**’ (like stone, mountains, seas, rocks, etc.).

The theory of hylomorphism is A’s way of explaining the **essence of every natural body** (not just the essence of human beings). By **essence** of a thing, A means what makes a thing what it is (i.e., the **what-ness of a thing**).

For A, **Prime Matter (PM)** alone is **actually nothing but potentially something**. It is **actually nothing** because you cannot say what it is. It has no characteristics or properties that would make it into a ‘something.’ That is why A says the PM is an ‘**indeterminate**’ principle. But it is

potentially something because it can become something when it receives a **form**. That is why A says the PM is a **determinable** principle. It can become a ‘something’ when it receives a form. The form that it receives is what will make it into a ‘something.’ That is why A says the **form** is a **determining principle**.

For A, there are **2 kinds of form: substantial form (SF)** and **accidental form (AF)**.

The **SF** is the form that, when added to the PM, it determines the essence of a thing. What kind of thing it will be (for example, a human being or an animal or a plant or a mineral) will depend upon the kind of SF that is infused into or received by the PM. So, for A, **PM alone** or **SF alone** will **not** determine the essence of a thing. **It has to be the substantial union of PM and SF.**

For A, there are **2 kinds of SF: the SF in non-living NB**, and **the SF in living NB**. For A, the SF in living NB is called **SOUL**. For A, the soul (*‘psyche’* in Greek, *‘anima’* in Latin) is the principle of life in a living natural body.

But, how do you know if a being has a soul? For A, this question is the same as asking, **how do you know if a being is living?** To answer this question, A differentiates between **2 kinds of motion or act: transient motion or act**, and **immanent motion or act**. In **transient motion**, the motion does not come from within the being itself; **instead**, there is an outside mover that is the cause of the motion (as when, for example, a chair is moved from the back of the room to the front of the room -- it did not move because of itself. There is someone else that moved it). If all that the being can manifest is transient motion or act, then for A it is **NOT** a living thing (i.e., it does NOT have a soul). **To be living (and therefore have a soul), it must be capable of immanent motion or act.** In **immanent motion** the motion begins from within the being itself. There is no outside mover that is the cause of the motion. For A, **immanent motion is what is indicative of life.**

For A, the kind of immanent motion that a being can perform will indicate the kind of soul that it has. For A, there are **3 kinds of soul: vegetative soul**, **sentient soul**, and **rational soul**.

For A, the **vegetative soul** is the **SF of a plant**. It enables the plant to do the immanent acts of **nutrition (N), growth (G), and reproduction (R)**. For A, these (N, G, R) are the immanent acts that **define a plant as a plant**. To do the immanent acts of N, G, and R is the life that is proper to a plant as a plant.

For A, the **sentient soul** is the **SF of an animal**. Like the plant, because of the sentient soul the animal is capable of the immanent acts of N, G, and R. But because the soul of the animal is not merely vegetative but rather sentient, the animal is capable of other immanent acts: **locomotion** (the capacity to move from place to place), and **sentientcy** (capacity to sense). These immanent

acts of locomotion and sentiency are the immanent acts that **define an animal as an animal**. To do locomotion and sentiency is the life proper to an animal as animal. **Sentiency has 2 aspects: the sentient cognitive aspects and the sentient appetitive aspects**. In the animal, its **sentient cognitive aspect** is manifested through its **capacity to know**. The **faculties** that enable the animal to know are its **senses** which are **2 kinds: the 5 external senses and the 4 internal senses** (which consist of **instinct, sense memory, sense imagination and central or common sense**). Through both the external and internal senses, **the animal can know**. Depending on what it knows about the object sensed or perceived, the animal develops certain **appetites or tendencies** either to seek the object known (if known to be good, pleasant or useful) or run away from the object known (if known to be bad, unpleasant or harmful). This is what is referred to by A as **the sentient appetitive aspect** in the animal. This sentient appetitive aspect is manifested through **feelings and emotions**. Because of this aspect, the animal can experience pleasure and pain or suffering.

For A, the **rational soul is the SF of a human being**. Because of the rational soul, **like the plant**, a human being is capable of N, G, and R; and **like an animal**, a human being is capable of locomotion and sentiency (and everything that sentiency entails). **What makes the human being different from the animal** is its capacity of **rationality**. For A, **rationality** is manifested in the **capacity to think** and the **capacity to choose**. For A, we have the **capacity to think** because we have the faculty of the **mind or reason**; and we have the **capacity to choose** because we have the faculty of the **will**. **The mind and the will are the faculties of the rational soul**. For A, **it is our rationality that defines us as human beings**. Take away our rationality we are just animals. For A, it is when we do acts that involve our mind (through thinking) and our will (through choosing) that we are truly human.

From this, we can infer the **essence of a human being**, according to Aristotle. For Aristotle, the human being is a **substance** (i.e., **being that exists**) that is **material or bodily** (this is what we share with **nonliving bodies**), **living** (that is capable of N, G, R **like a plant**), **sentient** (i.e., we have external and internal senses, and feelings and emotions **like an animal**), and **rational** (this is what make us to be **persons**, like the **immaterial** beings or pure spirits). For A, because there is a **material aspect** in us as well as an **immaterial aspect**, a human being is said to be like a **micro-cosmos (a small universe or world)**. **Some beings in the world are only material** (minerals, plants, animals); **some beings in the world are only immaterial** (pure spirits). What makes the human being **unique** for A is that it is **only the human being**, among all the beings that exists, **that has both a material aspect and an immaterial aspect**. For A, there is only **ONE WORLD (unlike Plato who claims that there are two worlds)** but **this world has both a material and an immaterial aspects**. Because a human being has both a material aspect and an immaterial aspect in its essence, Aristotle refers to a human being as being like a **micro-cosmos**.

For A, the **real human** is the **substantial union of both body** (aka **PM**) and **rational soul** (aka **SF**). **Body alone** or **soul alone** is **not really human**. The **substantial union of body and rational soul** is the **essence of a human being**. However, for A, **there is no human being that exists that is just human being**. Instead, what exists is **this** individual human being or **that** individual human being. So, **to be this individual human** (for example, Peter) **or that individual human being** (for example, Maria) **there must be**, in addition to the essence of a thing (which consists of PM and SF), **there must also be what is called by A as the accidental form (AF)**.

For A, the **accidental form (in contrast to the SF)** is **the form that, when added to the essence of a thing** (which consists of PM and SF), **makes the thing the individual thing that it is, differentiating it from other things sharing in the same essence**. For example, Peter is human; Maria is human. What makes Peter human is the same thing that makes Maria human. They share in the same essence. But what makes Peter, not just human, but this individual human being is the set of accidental forms (for example, being 6 feet tall, 165 lbs., a student, male, 20 yrs. old, son of Maria, etc.) in Peter. The same thing goes for Maria. Maria has the same essence as Peter (both are human beings), but what makes Maria not just human but this individual human being different from other human beings is the set of accidental forms (for example, being female, 100 lbs., mother, etc.) in Maria.

For A, what exists is the individual thing which consists of PM, SF and AF. This is true not only for human beings, but for all natural bodies (including animals, plants and minerals). For A, the individual things in this world is what is really real (unlike Plato who considers the things in this world as merely copies of the forms in the other world).