

## Lecture 5.2: Aristotle's Theory of Ideogenesis

The **theory of Ideogenesis** (**ideo** means idea and **genesis** means origin or beginning) is A's explanation of how ideas are formed in our mind. For A, **unlike Plato**, our mind at birth is like a **tabula rasa** (blank tablet), which means that we do not have **innate ideas**. So, for A, all our ideas must be acquired. **In the case of Plato**, because of the previous existence of the soul in the other world, we already have innate ideas, which is why for P knowledge is merely recollection as he presents in the Meno dialogue. In the case of A, since the rational soul does not pre-exist our body (as implied in his theory ofhylomorphism), there is no way for our soul to already have knowledge before we are born. That is why A compares our mind at birth to a **tabula rasa**. It is for this reason that A claims we do not have innate ideas. Because of that, A has to explain how then do we acquire ideas. This is what his **theory of ideogenesis** is about.

Since we do not have innate ideas for A, **knowledge has to begin with the sense experience**. For example, let us say we now have the idea of 'apple' in our mind. For A, we do not have innate idea of 'apple.' That idea (of "apple") must be acquired. **So how does he explain how we form the idea of 'apple' (and for that matter, each idea we now have in our mind)?** A explains it in this way:

First, let us say there is an apple on top of the table, and we are sensing the apple. The apple is the **object to be known**. This apple has **sensible qualities** (if you look at it, it is red; if you touch it, it is round, smooth, solid; if you taste it, it is crunchy and has a sweet-sour taste; if you smell it, it has the apple scent; etc.). These **sensible qualities of the apple** stimulate or affect our **external senses** and, as result of that stimulation, our external senses form a **sense impression of the apple**. For A, this is **the 1<sup>st</sup> level of knowledge**. At this point we **know** that there is an object out there (the apple on the table) that is affecting us (i.e., our external senses – it is something red, round, smooth, solid, crunchy, sweet-sour with a certain scent, etc. – **but we still do not know what that thing is** (i.e., we still do not know that it is an apple that is affecting our external senses)

Now, these sensible impressions of the apple are received by the **central/common sense** (one of our internal senses). Upon receiving these sensible impressions of the apple, the central sense will form an image of this object based on all these sensible impressions. This image of the object formed by the central sense from all the sensible impressions of it sent by the external senses is called the **percept** of the object (in this case, percept of an apple). For A, **this is the 2<sup>nd</sup> level of knowledge**. The percept of the object is the image of the object formed by the central sense corresponding to all the sensible impressions of it received by the external senses. **At this point, we not only know that there is something out there affecting our external senses, but we know what this something is that is affecting us.**

But while the percept of the object is a **higher level** of knowledge than our sensible impressions of it, this knowledge is still very limited because the central sense can only form the percept of

the object when we are presently perceiving or sensing the object. If we are no longer perceiving the object, the percept of it also goes away. Fortunately for us, we have other internal senses that enable us to preserve this percept of the object. The percept of the object is transformed into a phantasm of the object by any of the other 3 internal senses (**instinct**, **sense memory**, and **sense imagination**) that we have. The phantasm of the object is the image of the object that our internal senses formed when we are no longer perceiving the object. For A, **this is the 3<sup>rd</sup> level of knowledge**. It corresponds exactly to the very object that is stimulating our external senses. Because of that, **the phantasm** is always **about a particular, individual thing** (so that, if for example, there are 2 apples we have perceived, there will be two different phantasms of those two apples). **For A, the phantasm of the object is the highest level of knowledge that our senses can afford us.**

Once the phantasm of the object is formed, it is passed on to the **agent intellect** (**NOTE:** A calls the mind by different names depending upon what particular activity the mind is involved in. So the mind/reason and the agent intellect are one and the same faculty). Without the phantasm, there is nothing for the mind to begin thinking about (Remember, for A, we do not have innate ideas; so, the mind must wait for the phantasm of the object to be formed before it can begin to think). Upon receiving the phantasm of the object, the agent intellect will perform the act of **abstraction** on the phantasm. Abstraction is the act by which the mind separates one aspect of a thing (i.e., the **universal aspect** – in the case of the phantasm of an apple, this would be the characteristics contained in the phantasm of this apple that are found in most, if not all, apples) from its other aspects (i.e., the **individuating aspect** – in the case of the phantasm of an apple, this would be the characteristics contained in the phantasm of this apple [like being red, having a ‘bite,’ being bruised, having a worm inside, etc.] that can be found only in this apple but not in all or most apples). As a result of this abstraction the mind is able to grasp the essence of the thing (in this case the essence of an apple). A refers to this as the **abstracted essence of the thing**. **This is 4<sup>th</sup> level of knowledge for A.** At this point we now have an understanding of what makes the thing the thing that it is (in this case, we now know what makes an apple an apple).

Once the mind has the abstracted essence of the thing, the **passive intellect** (**Note:** the passive intellect and the mind are one and the same faculty. A just calls the mind passive intellect because of the activity the mind is now involved in in this process of knowledge, just as A calls the mind the agent intellect when he wants to refer to the act of abstraction that the mind is performing), will now transform this abstracted essence of the thing into an **IDEA**. This is how every idea that is now in our mind is formed. The idea of the thing, for A, is the image of the thing formed by mind that represents the essence of that thing as grasped by the mind.

**The formation of idea is just the beginning of what we call the act of thinking.** There are other acts of thinking (like judging, reasoning, etc.) that our mind can do, but it begins with first forming an idea of the thing. For A, when we say we have an idea of a thing, it does not mean that we do not know what it is and we have just some vague thoughts about it. **Instead, for A,**

**when we say have an idea of something, it means that our mind has grasped the essence of the thing and therefore we now know what it is, and therefore we can now differentiate it from other things.** In other words, for A, **to have an IDEA of something is to UNDERSTAND its essence** (that is, understand what makes it what it is). For A, **just like for P**, real knowledge consists in knowing the essence of the thing (in the case of A, that is through the process of abstraction performed by the agent intellect; in the case of Plato, that is by recollecting the forms [which give essence to the things in this world] in the other world which our soul already had knowledge of before it was embodied). Also, for both P and A, we must rely on the mind [not the senses] to enable us to know the essence of the thing (in the case of A, the senses can only give us the phantasm of the thing; in the case of P, the senses only provide the occasion for recollecting).

**NOTE: For both P and A, the MIND and the BRAIN are NOT synonymous (the same). The MIND is a faculty of the soul while the BRAIN is an organ of the body.**