

Chapter Six

Aristotle's Theory of Causation and the Ideas of Potentiality and Actuality

Key Words: Form and matter, potentiality and actuality, teleological, change, evolution. Formal cause, material cause, efficient cause, final cause, unmoved mover, God, eudaemonia, virtue.

This chapter will explain Aristotle's teleological conception of reality, a doctrine we have introduced in the previous chapter. We have seen how Aristotle deals with the problem of change. He conceives it as evolution, where in the process of becoming, the potentialities of a thing are actualized and the different forms design the matter differently. The form of an object changes when it evolves into another thing. For example, In the process of the seed evolving into a tree, different forms design the matter in different ways in each stage of its evolution. Matter remains more or less the same.

Aristotle thus proclaims that change is not blind or meaningless, but is purposeful and hence is teleological. All change is evolution. The whole process is explained by analyzing the relationship between form and matter, the two ultimate realities in his metaphysical scheme. As far as conceiving the general Idea as the essence of the particular, he agrees with Plato. But he opposes Plato's transcendentalism and affirms that Ideas do not exist apart from things. Instead, idea is inherent or immanent in the thing by being its form and hence cannot be separated from it except by abstraction.

To understand Aristotle's idea of evolution we may have to know how he explains the relationship between form and matter and how he accounts for motion or movement in his scheme. Reality is constituted of all the three: form, matter and movement. As mentioned above, forms are immanent in things, which are constitutive of matter and matter has no reality apart from the form. Movement also cannot exist by itself and presupposes a substratum. In other words, form, matter and movement have no real or substantial existence independent of each other. Reality consists of all these taken as a whole and these constitutive elements of reality can only be separated in thought.

The problem of change is a perennial philosophical problem in many civilizations. It is also related to the question of the nature of reality. For example, in Indian philosophy many

systems like Buddhism, Nyaya, Samkhya and Vedanta have different conceptions about the nature and reality of change. In the Greek tradition itself this has been a major issues of debate, in which Heraclitus and Parmenides have taken opposite stands; the former proposing ceaseless change while the latter conceiving change as illusory. Plato followed Parmenides and rejected the reality of change. Aristotle brings all these problems into a single framework and presents a comprehensive conception of reality. He adopts a middle path, which seeks to avoid the extremes.

Aristotle's View of Change

Aristotle's philosophy introduces a teleological conception in the very outset and explains the nature of reality accordingly. This view holds that behind everything that happens in the world a purpose is unraveled. There is a higher purpose, which is being realized. Hence in order to understand anything one needs to understand this purpose. For this we have to analyze the form—matter relationship in the light of two other concepts of potentiality and actuality.

The distinction between the two concepts of potentiality and actuality helps us understand the nature of reality and the form—matter relationship in a better manner. It also helps understanding the nature of change. Aristotle holds that bare matter is potentiality of form. According to him, different forms shape the matter differently in change. At every stage of evolution, the thing in question will have more form than before. In other words, it is then more actual, a more advanced stage of existence. Aristotle's theory of causation explains the process of becoming things undergo with the explanation of change in various stages. For example when a seed evolves into a tree, it necessarily happens through several stages; seed →sapling→tree→fruit.

But underlying these different stages, there must be something that undergoes changes; something that persists in the change. Here Aristotle's theory of causation explains how matter remains changeless and persists during change. It exhibits different qualities—as a result of being shaped or designed by different forms—on different occasions or stages of evolution. During change, an object changes its form. But form itself does not change and become anything different than what it is. In this sense, forms are also changeless. Here he agrees with Plato who considers forms as essences.

Aristotle's theory of causation thus explains the form—matter relationship in the following manner. Matter assumes different forms and this is manifested as a series in the process of evolution. Different forms have always existed and they one after another shape the matter. This happens in a series, which is manifested as change in the external world. Neither matter nor form come into existence or disappear, as they are eternal principles of things. According to Aristotle, change in the physical world presupposes a peculiar interrelation with them. He conceives matter as the principle of possibility and form as the principle of reality or actuality. Evolution is the process where things evolve towards stages of existence that will have more and more form than before and this process continues till change becomes unnecessary; until all the potentialities are actualized.

Aristotle's God

This presupposes a concept of pure form and pure actuality and suggests such a being in whom they come together. God is such a being who is pure form and pure actuality. He is the unmoved mover. Aristotle's teleological conception has its culmination in this idea of God as the unmoved mover, the Form of all forms. God is conceived as the Supreme Being, as the pure form and pure actuality. He is never changing, the eternal first cause of the universe, the only true substance, and pure actuality. In this sense Aristotle's God is not the God of any religion. He is someone in whom motion has originated, which nevertheless remains unmoved.

The concept of God substantiate Aristotle's teleological outlook which conceives the motion on the universe as purposeful and meaningful. As Russell observes, this notion of God helps him presenting his doctrine as optimistic and teleological: the universe and everything in it is developing towards something continually better than what went before. Hence Aristotle's scheme of things have the God at the center, to which he relates other important concepts. Like potentiality and actuality, form and matter, the doctrine that all change is evolution and finally the theory of causation.

The Theory of Causation

The discussion of the thesis that all change is evolution is incomplete without elaborating the doctrine of causation, which would explain the generative causes of real being or the cause of all things in nature. It has to explain further the principles of causation that produces change and results in the production of objects of art and even of human beings. Aristotle thus

introduces four categories of causes; the formal, material, efficient and final. We shall explain this with the help of an example of a carpenter making a wooden chair.

The formal cause is the idea or plan in the mind of the carpenter, according to which he makes the chair. It is the blue print or the plan, which he has in the mind. The material cause is the wood of which the chair is made; the efficient cause is the arms, hands, and tools, as motive forces used by the carpenter. It is through these efficient causes he makes the chair. The final cause is the final product, the chair, which is the purpose that set these forces in action and effected the transition from potentiality to actuality. In other words, it is that for the sake of which it is made.

Aristotle conceives that these four principles operate, not only in the objects we human make (like chairs and other artifacts) but also in nature; the only difference is that, in the case of nature the artist and his product are not separate. Here the form or plan and the end or purpose coincides. He argues that the purpose of the organism is the realization of its form, which is the idea of motion. Hence in the ultimate sense, there are only two causes: form and matter.

In the process of evolution matter evolves into what it is potential of. For example, the seed into the tree, the wood into chair. The potentiality represents its purpose and hence it can also be equated with a directing force inherent in matter. We may say that the directing force inherent in the seed makes it a tree and it cannot become anything else. Potentiality of a thing is determined by form, which is actuality. Hence it is fixed and not accidental. Here Aristotle opposes the mechanistic-atomistic view advocated by Democritus and many others. He argues that change is not blind or purposeless; instead it is teleological. Nature is dynamic and teleological and not mechanical.

As we have seen above, the concept of God helps Aristotle to explain the inherent teleology in the universe. This idea of God enables Aristotle establishing the unity of the universe and accounting for the beginning of motion. Motion in turn, enables the actualization of the potential. Matter has an inherent tendency to move towards its potentials, as in the case of the seed, which has the tendency to move towards the tree. In other words, we may say that matter has a desire for the form.

The Aristotelian ontology is thus constitutive of God, matter and form. Since matter and form are eternal and they eternally coexist, motion is also eternal. This eternal motion in turn

presupposes an eternal unmoved mover, who is God, the ultimate cause of motion which is unmoved. Motion has its beginning there in God who is the eternal unmoved first mover. He is the fundamental ground of all vital forces in nature and is the pure form without matter. He is the absolute spirit, the highest purpose of the world, the highest good of the world and the highest motivating force of the universe. All beings crave for the realization of their potentialities because of this ultimate motivator.

It is God who gives the universe a higher purpose which causes motion. He is the highest Good, who comprises all actuality and who is pure intelligence. He is the unifying principle of the universe and every possibility realizes in Him. He is the principle of all order and unity.

The Place of Man and His Highest Goal: *Eudaemonia* and the Concept of Virtue

Aristotle's philosophy reserves a special place for man, as he is different from other living creatures. Man according to him is a rational animal, who is the final goal of nature. What makes man different is the presence of a soul which can rationalize and conceptualize.

The human being has a body and a soul. The body is only an instrument and hence it presupposes a user who uses it, which is the soul. The soul is the agent of motion in the body as no motion is mechanical. It is also the principle of life, as it controls and guides all motion.

One peculiar feature of Aristotle's philosophy in general and his conception of man in particular is the explanation provided in the light of a doctrine of function. Aristotle's teleological outlook urges that all human actions have some goal, which itself is a means to a still higher goal and so on and on. This points to the fact that there is a supreme end or purpose, which is the ultimate good for the sake of which every other good is sought.

We may explain this in a different way. Aristotle argues that every object has a specific end or good. Which consists in the realization of its specific nature. This specific nature distinguishes it from other things. Now he examines what is this specific nature of man. Human nature cannot be understood in terms of mere a vegetative existence as in the case of plants nor in terms of animal functions like perception, desires, pain, pleasure etc. Instead, man's life is a life of reason, the attribute that distinguishes man from the rest of the creatures. Therefore, the highest good of man is the realization of this life of reason. In this

context Aristotle introduces the concept of *eudaemonia*, which according to him is the highest good for man.

Aristotle argues that the human soul has irrational parts as well and hence reason needs to coordinate all of them to attain the final goal. He thus says that this consists in achieving the right relationship and balance between reason, feeling and desire. Here he exhibits his aversion towards adopting the extreme viewpoints. He advocates an avoidance of extremes and argues that virtues consist in this.

Eudaemonia as such is not a passive internal feeling. It consists in the experience of a better life or the best life itself, where all of our functions are fulfilled. It also means to live a virtuous life. To elaborate this Aristotle explicates a tripartite conception of the human soul. The soul has nutritive or vegetative functions which cause nutrition and growth. This aspect of the soul is irrational. The other function of the soul is appetitive, which is attentive to reasoning. But the third part, which is intellectual is rational in itself. *Eudaemonia* presupposes a life of reason as it is superior to the other two and the distinguishing feature of man.

Virtues also play a crucial role in this process. Aristotle asserts that virtues are to be sought for attaining *eudaemonia*. A virtue is a mean between two vices and hence it consists in the avoidance of excess as well as deficit. It is a trait that contributes to a person functioning well as a human being. In other words, a trait that engages him in a life of reason. It is thus a learned disposition to reason and act in a certain way.

There are predominantly two kinds of virtues: intellectual and moral. The former can be taught directly and the latter is the result of habit and must be lived to be learned. It is the result of a practical wisdom and is the golden mean or intermediate between two extremes. For example bravery is the mean or intermediate between cowardliness and rashness and it has to be learned through practice. No virtue can be learned on a purely intellectual level.

Quiz:

1. According to Aristotle, what happens when things change?
(a) They evolve (b) Their potentialities are actualized (c) Different forms design the matter differently (d) All of the above.
2. Which of the following is true of Aristotle?

- (a) Form and matter are unrelated independent realities (b) Form is independent but matter depends on form (c) Form alone is real, matter is unreal (d) Form and matter have no real or substantial existence independent of each other
3. When a thing evolves it undergoes several stages of existence. In each stage:
(a) The thing has more form than the preceding stage (b) The matter of which the thing is constituted changes (c) as unreal as the previous stage as all change is illusory (d) None of the above.
4. Aristotle's God is:
(a) Creator of the universe (b) pure form and pure actuality (c) Pure Form (d) Pure actuality.
5. The motive forces like hands, and tools, used by the carpenter to make a chair is:
(a) Formal cause (b) Material cause (c) Efficient cause (d) Final cause.

Answer Key:

1. (c)
2. (d)
3. (a)
4. (b)
5. (c)

Assignment

1. Explain Aristotle's theory of causation.
2. Discuss Aristotle's conception of God.
3. Explain the process of change as discussed by Aristotle.

References and Further Reading

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