

## CHAPTER I

## THE DISORDERS

## I. ARISTOTLE AND PLATO

When Plato died in 347 Aristotle was thirty-seven years old and had spent the last twenty years first as a student and then as a teacher in Plato's Academy. How is Aristotle's philosophical thinking related to Plato's philosophical thinking?

(i) *Disciple or rebel?*

One is tempted to suppose *a priori* that Aristotle is the heir to, and continuator of Plato's philosophy. How could the pupil of a philosophical genius fail to be his disciple? Yet it is notorious that in his very early productive years Aristotle is already making vigorous and radical attacks upon Plato's Theory of Forms. Even where this Theory is not in question Aristotle is nearly equally vigorous in his criticisms of, *inter alia*, Plato's account of the notion of Pleasure and of the geometrical chemistry of Plato's *Timaeus*.

One is then tempted to suppose that Aristotle developed by early reaction out of the receptive disciple that he must have once been. Aristotle's philosophy is, perhaps, a philosophy of secession. Yet scholars have looked in vain in Aristotle's most juvenile writings for any convincing traces of the desiderated early pieties. Nowhere does Aristotle talk like an acolyte. Nor even does he seem any-

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where to talk like an angry or a guilty rebel against his old master. He discusses Platonic doctrines like an exacting critic, but not like an apostate; and while often arguing against Platonic conclusions, he often wields Platonic arguments against the errors of others. The polar notions of the limit and the limitable are cardinal in Plato's *Philebus* and *Parmenides*; and they are cardinal in, among other things, Aristotle's *Physics*. The very unpartisanship both of Aristotle's rejections and of his sharings of Platonic thoughts should make one suspicious from the start of the hypothesis that Aristotle was a loyal disciple, but also of the hypothesis that he was a renegade disciple of Plato.

#### (ii) Aristotle's description of Plato

In his survey of the history of philosophy in his *Metaphysics* I Aristotle gives an account of Plato's philosophy which baffles us in two ways. He describes a Pythagorean stage in Plato's thought to which in our Platonic dialogues almost nothing corresponds, save for some hints in the *Philebus*. Secondly, he says nothing here and very little elsewhere about that important stage in Plato's thought which is very fully represented in his *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Parmenides*. It is true that Aristotle's survey of previous philosophy was confined to the ways in which his predecessors had anticipated or failed to anticipate his own doctrine of the Four Causes, and these four dialogues were not upon this particular track. None the less Aristotle's omission of any mention of this development in Plato's thought is surprising, and all the more surprising because Plato's thought here seems to us to be at its least other-

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worldly and at its most Aristotelian in tenor and even sometimes in diction. In the *Parmenides*, Part I, Plato assembles some powerful arguments against what had been his own Theory of Forms, and at least one of these arguments is closely akin to one which Aristotle himself employs. Yet Aristotle nowhere mentions this fact. Actually he nowhere mentions this dialogue by name, though he almost certainly alludes to some points in it in his *Physics*. Nor does Aristotle mention the argument in Plato's *Sophist*, that the Friends of the Forms would have to concede the unqualified reality of at least some non-timeless, mutable entities, namely thinking beings. Not only the other-worldly is fully real. Aristotle fairly often alludes to, draws on or mentions, though not by name, Plato's *Theaetetus*, yet he does not discuss the philosophically most original things in this dialogue, despite the fact that in his *Categories* and his *De Interpretatione* his own interests and even some of his own semi-technical vocabulary are closely akin to those of Plato when he composed both this dialogue and the *Cratylus* and *Sophist*. We get the impression that Aristotle, so far from having been brought up and moulded on these dialogues from his late teens, was at best superficially acquainted with them when he wrote his *Categories* and the beginning of his *De Interpretatione*.

(iii) *Non-Platonic influences on Aristotle*

Conversely, there are cardinal ideas with which, from his early productive years, Aristotle operates confidently and systematically, which have their provenance in nothing

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written or taught by Plato. For one thing, Aristotle seems almost to begin his philosophical life fully equipped with an elaborate apparatus of categories. He employs this apparatus for, *inter alia*, his criticisms of the Theory of Forms. It is difficult to see how this apparatus could just have occurred to the young Aristotle, and equally difficult to see how he or anyone else could have developed it out of any Platonic doctrines or even out of any revolt against such doctrines. For another thing, Aristotle was, from pretty early in his career as a philosopher, quite at home with the notion of Potentiality *versus* Actuality, and with the kindred notions of Possibility, Contingency, Necessity and Impossibility. That the stimulus to Aristotle's thoughts on these modal notions came from recent or contemporary Megarians is a tempting guess. At least no such stimulus could have come from anything written by Plato with the dubious exception of his *Hippias Minor*. There seem to have existed some powerful non-Platonic formative influences upon the young Aristotle; and Plato's formative influence seems to have been both slighter and patchier than we had assumed.

(iv) *The remote Plato*

Next, while we must admire the studied impersonality of Aristotle's lecture-manners, we should still feel some surprise at finding in the course of Aristotle's voluminous works not one certain echo from Plato's tutorial voice, hardly one anecdote about Plato as a man, and hardly one mention of any trait of Plato's character. We cannot tell from anything said by Aristotle whether Plato possessed or

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lacked the endearing approachability of his own Socrates. Aristotle took notes of Plato's unpublished *Lecture on the Good*, and we know something of what Aristotle had there recorded, and of his comments upon the contents of this *Lecture*. Apart from this we hear almost nothing from Aristotle of Plato's spoken instructions; of his contributions to discussions; of his replies to questions and objections; or of his jokes or repartees, if any. It is as if Aristotle knew as a reader many, though not all, of Plato's dialogues; knew as a listener Plato's *Lecture on the Good*; but did not know Plato the man. Incidentally, it is something of a puzzle that Aristotle shows very little knowledge of or interest in Plato's *Republic*. Outside his *Politics*, which contains moderately full discussions of the political gist of *Republic*, Books II–V and Book VIII, Aristotle very seldom mentions or draws on the *Republic*. Our students, in their study of the Line, the Cave, the Sun, the Idea of the Good, the relation between dialectic and the sciences, can get little reflected light from Aristotle. He is silent about what is for them the heart of Platonism. The *Republic's* definition of Justice as Minding one's own Business is not even mentioned by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*, *Topics*, *Eudemian Ethics* or *Nicomachean Ethics* V, which is in its entirety a discussion of the nature of Justice. By contrast, Aristotle incessantly mentions, echoes and controverts things in Plato's *Timaeus*.

In his *Politics* II Aristotle two or three times complains that in Plato's *Republic* certain cardinal questions were left unanswered, and certain cardinal doctrines were left indeterminate. Neither he nor his colleagues seem to have

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asked Plato personally for the needed amplifications. Was Plato unapproachable? Or was his *Republic* unknown to them while Plato was alive?

(v) *Plato and the Topics*

Finally, at the end of his *De Sophisticis Elenchis*, where he makes his solitary excursion into autobiography, Aristotle says that unlike the composers of other Training Manuals, for example of rhetoric, he himself in composing his *Art of Dialectic*, that is, our *Topics*, had had to start from absolute scratch. He does indeed draw specimens of dialectical points, good and bad, from Plato's dialogues. But for the theory or methodology of dialectical argumentation he owes no debts to anyone. It follows that Plato had not taught Aristotle dialectic and therefore that he had not taught Aristotle philosophy in Plato's prevailing, though not his terminal sense of the word. Aristotle may have sat at Plato's feet for instruction in the scientific content of the *Timaeus*, though even this can be contested. But not for instruction in the strategy or tactics of the Socratic Method deployed in the *Charmides*, the *Euthydemus*, the *Gorgias* or Book I of the *Republic*.

It seems then that many things are wrong with our habitual picture of Aristotle studying philosophy under Plato's personal tutelage from the age of eighteen, and absorbing from about the same date even the latest of Plato's dialogues.

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## 2. PLATO

Apart from perplexities and dubieties about the connexions between Plato's and Aristotle's philosophical thinking there are independent reasons for doubting the standard accounts of Plato's own philosophical life.

(i) *Plato's Floruit*

It is often assumed that Plato was a self-moving philosopher when quite a young man, and in particular that he was composing Socratic dialogues soon after, if not before the death of Socrates in 399, when Plato was about thirty. As there exists no evidence whatsoever to confirm it, it looks as if the assumption rests partly on the *a priori* idea that a philosopher, or at least a great philosopher, has in the nature of things to have launched himself on his vocation when full of the vigour of youth. But this *a priori* view is easily demolished. Aristotle, Berkeley and Hume were indeed early flowerers; but if Locke and Kant had died in their middle fifties, histories of philosophy would hardly mention their names. The question Was Plato a Hume or a Kant? is an open question.

There may be, not another reason, but an unwitting motive behind the standard assumption. No one can read Plato's early Socratic dialogues without loving Plato's Socrates. The hope that the real Socrates was like Plato's Socrates can tempt us to bolster up Plato's biographical credibility by dating the composition of his Socratic dialogues very close to the lifetime of Socrates. Hoping that Plato was a Boswell and not a Landor we welcome the

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idea that when he wrote his early Socratic dialogues the voice of the real Socrates was still ringing in his ears. There is nothing unworthy in this hope. But it is not evidence and in fact there is no evidence at all to support the hope. It will be seen that there is conclusive evidence in the other direction.

The same doubts can be raised about the date of the foundation of Plato's Academy. We can be sure that this foundation came after Plato's first journey to Sicily at the beginning of the 380's. But we have no evidence at all to show that it came soon after his return. We know that the Academy was founded before 367 when the young Aristotle joined it; and before 369 when Theaetetus perished, having already become a teacher in it. But the prevalent supposition that Plato founded the Academy when he was in his early forties and not in his early or even late fifties is quite unsupported by evidence. It will be seen that there is very strong evidence in the other direction.

*(ii) Plato's Platonism*

Platonic scholars and commentators sometimes present their philosopher in a shape into which no one would dream of trying to squeeze any other philosopher. It is made to appear that fairly early in Plato's philosophical life, if not at its start, a special doctrine occurred to him. This doctrine, often dubbed 'Platonism', from then on remained his creed and no other important philosophical problems or ideas ever occurred to him. The bulk of his philosophical life was occupied in keeping this banner nailed to his mast.



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Scholars and commentators have tried hard and with some success to trace the course of the philosophical development of Aristotle and to describe his exploitations of new equipments that he had provided for himself and his relinquishments of prepossessions of which he had become critical. Aristotle grew. Yet save in some minor matters no such growth has been generally permitted to Plato. Though praising Plato as the Master Thinker history has commonly allowed him no important new thinking and certainly no radical re-thinking. He had nothing more to learn from anyone else or even from himself. He never had to correct any serious mistakes of his own or to clear up any confusions in which he had formerly been. He started his explorations with the discovery of his Treasure Island; he had no need or desire to explore any more. In giving his latest philosophical writings to mankind he had nothing of importance to do save to repeat his habitual message.

That Plato's dialogues cannot be construed to fit this picture of the static philosopher needs to be argued in detail. For the moment it is necessary to state the *a priori* truth that being a philosopher cannot be like this. In theology a man may be captured for life by a doctrine. There is some tenet in which he is just a lifelong believer. But, *pace* the majority of historians of philosophy, philosophy is not adherence to a tenet or membership of a church or party. It is exploration. Only a *Terra Incognita* is interesting. It is a matter of course that a philosopher, like any other inquirer, is all the time learning at least from himself, at best both from himself and from others. If Plato was anything of

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a philosopher, then he cannot have been merely a lifelong Platonist. His problem of today cannot have been just his already solved single problem of two or twenty years ago. If Plato's late dialogues contain nothing of philosophical importance that was not already present in his middle or his early dialogues, we should say bluntly that Plato's philosophical arteries hardened regrettably soon, and that he was not a philosopher after his composition of those middle or early dialogues.

To say this is not to prejudge the question whether Plato's Theory of Forms is or contains the right solution to his then problem, whatever this problem was. It is only to say that if Plato had solved his then problem or thought that he had done so, then either he was intellectually sclerotic in never being teased by any ulterior problem; or else he was not sclerotic and so did not remain a mere partisan of Platonism. Either Plato was, after his adoption of Platonism, not much of a thinker, or his champions have misrepresented his thought. Either new problems did not force themselves on him—or they did. But if they did, then the story of Plato's philosophical development still awaits the telling. In justice to Plato we should ask not 'Did Plato grow?' but rather 'What was the course of his philosophic growth?'

#### (iii) *The crisis*

In Plato's early and dramatically lively dialogues the argumentative action takes the shape of Socrates driving his interlocutors by sequences of questions into admitting the falsity of the theses that they had been defending. The