

Some Steps Towards Overcoming the Distance  
Between Aristotle and Kant: Part II

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Since Kant's theory of the soul (self or mind)<sup>1</sup> is very much an account of mental activity, activity which is constitutive of what is known, it is necessary to review briefly some main tenets of his Critical Philosophy. Kant begins by distinguishing three aspects of the human mind, i.e., the sensibility, the understanding, and reason. For Kant, only the sensibility and the understanding when taken together yield knowledge. That is, the only legitimate employment of the understanding is in categorically arranging what is given in intuition or through the sensibility. As for reason, its legitimate use, with regard to theoretical knowledge, is in systematic unification which at the same time affords us the greatest possible extension of our knowledge.<sup>2</sup> But, what we are interested in is the relationship between the sensibility and the understanding. For it is at this level that knowledge of objects is possible.

It is important to emphasize here a central theme in Kant's philosophy expressed in the words, "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."<sup>3</sup> What Kant is drawing our attention to is a necessary or essential relationship between sense and understanding, one which makes possible the experience of objects as they appear to us. That is to say, representations (or what appears to us in experience) are possible only if two sets of conditions are present, namely, those of the sensibility and the understanding. Furthermore, it is to open one's philosophy to serious problems if either is emphasized over the other. We need only recall the theories Kant criticized and which were reviewed in the opening remarks of a previous paper to see the problems that come from the over-emphasis of one aspect.<sup>4</sup> The essential relationship between the two powers consists in their "union", Kant says, which is the condition for objects of experience.<sup>5</sup> It is only of objects understood in this way that we may have knowledge. Kant therefore provides the further explanation; "We cannot think an object save through the categories; we cannot know an object of thought save through intuitions corresponding to these concepts."<sup>6</sup>

It should be stressed that, as expressed in the last quotation, knowledge for Kant consists of two elements, intuitions and concepts. The former, by themselves do not afford knowledge of objects any more than do the concepts (categories), taken by themselves. This is not to say that in order to have knowledge an object must be represented here and now for this would imply the impossibility of

mathematics and pure science of nature. This would mean that all of our knowledge is derived and dependent upon the particular object. And that this is not his view Kant makes very clear in the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*; "In order of time...we have no knowledge antecedent to experience...But though all our knowledge begins with experience it does not follow that it all arises out of experience."<sup>7</sup> In other words there are elements brought to experience by the knowing subject. Up to this point it has been these elements that we have been discussing. These elements, in so far as they have an empirical employment are constitutive of the object represented to us. The elements brought to experience by the knowing subject are the conditions for the object to be represented to us and therefore are a priori. The result of this function of the sensibility and the understanding is empirical knowledge of which only certain aspects may be determined before experience. These predetermined aspects are none other than the forms of intuition (space and time) and the categories which determine the combination of the manifold of intuition.<sup>8</sup> Since they are the conditions for objects in general, they apply to any particular object given in intuition.

Taken in their pure form intuition and understanding are conditions of objects in general and therefore give rise to a priori bodies of knowledge such as mathematics and a pure science of nature. However, we are concerned with the constitutive role that intuition and understanding have in the experience of an object rather than the sciences rendered possible by these conditions of experience.

We are, by now, at the point where we may begin our comparative treatment of Kant and Aristotle. One thing that should not be forgotten as we proceed is that no reduction of one philosopher to the other is being attempted.

From the sketch of Kant's theory one of the important aspects to be recalled is that for Kant, knowledge consists of the union of two elements. Indeed, these two elements, if separated, constitute nothing knowable to our minds. For Kant, even the mere recognition that there are two aspects to knowledge presupposes their union. When we distinguish among the elements of something our task is analytical. We are analyzing something into its components. But the ground that makes possible this very analysis is a synthesis. That is, analysis presupposes a synthesis. As Kant explains, "where the understanding has not previously combined it cannot dissolve."<sup>9</sup>

We may stop and ask here whether or not there is something parallel in Aristotle. Of course, I suggest there is; however alert we may remain to the differences. We may, to begin with, notice a rather superficial resemblance of Kant's theory of the priority of the synthetic unity to, I believe, one of Aristotle's most important doctrines, the distinction between actuality and potentiality. The resemblance between the two lies in the priority placed on what actually is. In Kant, synthesis is prior to analysis as the condition for the latter. In Aristotle's

philosophy, actuality is ultimately prior to potentiality.<sup>10</sup> Admittedly this seems quite superficial and it may be criticized that since Kant's synthetic unity is transcendental whereas Aristotle's actuality/potency distinction is a metaphysical principle, hence transcendent, then there is left no ground on which to discuss any alleged resemblance between the two. However, this is not the extent or the depth of the parallel.

Consider now Aristotle's theory of actuality and potentiality. It was in order to account for change without implying that being was coming from non-being. And, as we have noted above, this explanation is metaphysical, consisting of principles which apply to objects which exist externally to and independent of us. Kant would argue quite the opposite, that we may have no knowledge of entities that are not objects of possible experience. This radically restricts human knowledge. In Kant's view, what is not given in intuition and not thought in terms of the categories of the understanding is either "impossible, or at least would be nothing to me."<sup>11</sup>

As is well known Aristotle held that we have knowledge of a host of things existing independently of us. Yet, if we reflect for a moment we will find, I believe, that the common interpretation of Aristotle is not so clear and simple as we are lead to believe. The interesting developments arise in Aristotle's treatment of knowledge. But, before we can examine Aristotle's account of knowledge we must review some of his basic principles. Like the ideas of other great thinkers the many elements which make up Aristotle's philosophy are so integrated that in order to understand one we must refer to others. The three central doctrines of Aristotle are those of substance, and the two distinctions of actuality/potentiality, and matter/form. The two sets of distinctions can only be understood in connection with Aristotle's notion of substance.

A substance, for Aristotle, was the individual entity, be it a particular stone, tree, animal or man. In this theory, Aristotle stood in contrast to the theories that argued that the real was something formal, something common to several entities. Substance conceived in this way was either material, e.g., Thales water, or 'spiritual', e.g., Plato's forms. Aristotle, however, subscribed to neither of the above theories. A substance for Aristotle was the individual entity, existing in the world with a career of its own. This does not mean, however that Aristotle had no appreciation for the conceptions that had come before. For another essential feature of Aristotle's doctrine was the distinction between matter and form. True, a substance was for Aristotle the real entity. However, two aspects could be discerned in the individual unity that a substance is, i.e. the matter and the form. To put it simply, form can no more exist apart from matter than can matter exist apart from form. The only way in which matter and form are separable is in thought.<sup>12</sup> Matter, for instance is now knowable in itself.<sup>13</sup> Yet we are quite certain that since

the form, which tells us that something is "of such a kind"<sup>14</sup> is general, there must be some other principle that is the source of individuation. This other principle can only be matter.<sup>15</sup>

The last of the three main doctrines of Aristotle's theory is the distinction between actuality and potentiality. We have already come across this distinction in connection with Kant's conception of synthetic unity. The distinction, as we have mentioned, was concerned with how change was possible without implying that being came from non-being. In short, a particular substance could not become other than what it is, at present, actually is unless the substance was already potentially other than what it is. For instance, in considering a particular substance, say, an acorn, we could assert that what this substance actually is, is an acorn. However we may also assert that what is actually an acorn is at the same time, potentially an oak tree.<sup>16</sup>

Now, with regard to the interrelatedness of the three doctrines we should recall that the matter/form distinction presupposed substance. As for the actuality/potency distinction, its meaningful application is also to substance. Furthermore, Aristotle draws a correspondence between matter and potency and form and actuality.<sup>17</sup> In any understanding of how change takes place in a substance four factors will now be involved. Our acorn, for example, can develop into an oak tree only because a substance, which we understand as matter in the form of acorn, may come into the form of a oak tree. Furthermore, given the substance that it is, its *whatness* sets limits and determines the forms that it may come into. It is not of the nature of the substance we have been discussing to become other than an oak tree (or at most some wooden artifact). It is not of the nature of an acorn to develop into an automobile.

Like Kant, Aristotle believed that sense experience was an essential element of human knowledge. In a summary of his thoughts on the soul, Aristotle says that it is impossible to "learn or understand anything in the absence of sense."<sup>18</sup> He even claimed that speculative thought required images which resemble objects given through the senses, without the matter.<sup>19</sup> That there is a similarity between the two philosophers on this point hardly needs mentioning. However, the similarity will be more striking if we examine the theories more closely.

Aristotle says of the "faculty of sensation" that it has only potential existence.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, Aristotle is here presupposing the distinction between actuality and potency. Remember, also, that it is only when the potentialities of some things have been realized that it can be considered to have come into its final form; that is, become fully actualized. Now in the case of the faculty of sensation, its true form is to function as the means by which we may experience sensible objects. And, only when the faculty of sensation is engaged with a sensible object is its potentiality to sense objects brought into complete actuality. In a few words,

