

*By way of an Introduction: These pages contain individual chapters from my 1990 book, Postmodern Sophistications. I have obtained the rights to the essays am making them available separately. The entire text of the book is also available on Research Gate.*

*The underlying aim of this collection of essays was to question the opposition between the Sophists and Plato. That classic dispute has been the model for many discussions of tensions within our society:: on the one hand you have the clever manipulative salesmen who care nothing about truth. On the other hand the rigorous scientific investigation that never quite makes contact with politics. Rootless nihilism vs. naturally grounded values. Anarchy vs. Rules.*

*These essays developed a pragmatic middleground, using ideas from Heidegger and Dewey; in later writings I rely more on Hegel. But the point remains the same: don't listen to the Straussians and others who try to force our thinking (or our politics or art or philosophy) into a blunt opposition between truth-loving traditionalists (Socrates) and flaky relativistic postmoderns (the Sophists). It was not so simple in Greece and it's not so simple today.*

*Part of the book deals with postmodern critiques of rational knowledge, with Lyotard and Habermas on center stage. Their opposition remains relevant, although post-1990 developments in deconstruction and critical theory have widened and deepened the debate. The points made in these essays remain useful, if not complete.*

*The second part of the book deals with architecture, where modern and postmodern staged a public standoff. The word postmodern has now gone out of fashion in architecture. But the earlier use of the term still applies to the attempt to weave historical references back into architectural practices that had been taught to seek formal purity. .*

*I stand by my diagnosis of postmodern architecture as just another modern distance from history, and my argument that that modern architecture's proclaimed distance from history was itself an illusion. We are more embedded in history than the moderns wanted to think, although that embodiment is not as total and restrictive as they imagined for our ancestors.*

*If you find any of these ideas useful, true, provocative, let me know. If you find them absurd or useless airy nothings, I'd still be delighted to learn from your reactions.*

*David Kolb, January 2018*

*Charles A. Dana Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Bates College*

*davkolb@gmail.com, www.dkolb.org, mobile 547 868 4713*

*This second chapter asks about certitude, truth, and method in the Greeks.*

## **Chapter 2. The Last Word in Greek Philosophy**

To replace the interminable old myths but avoid the premature closure offered by the Sophists, Plato sought a method which would find the guaranteed last word. What does it mean to have the last word, to settle a debate? On the modern view debates are settled by experts. Debates can be ended by force or influence; a rhetorician, or a charismatic leader, or a soldier can stop people from talking, for a while. But it takes an expert to settle a debate, to pin it down so it cannot float any more.

The scientist is our model expert who has the facts and the proofs. The experts join together to produce the total last word, Unified Science. All the facts, and all the laws for each region of facts, and all expressible in one basic language: it is with this that Descartes suggests we can become "the masters and possessors of the earth." This word will deflate illusions, settle debates, and give a basis for our actions and plans. If we want to rebuild our city (an image both Plato and Descartes favor) we are told we would do well to put our decisions on such a firm foundation.

This picture of the last word has been under scrutiny lately. We are not so confident of it as we used to be. In this chapter I want to look back at the Greeks who are supposed to have inflicted this metaphysical notion of the last word upon us. I will argue that the practice of the Greek philosophers was more flexible than the reports of their theories would have us believe. Maybe our own practice is or could be more flexible as well.

### **Aristotle**

I turn first to Aristotle. The way he describes the last word can look similar to our own. He speaks of sciences that concern different kinds of beings, coordinated by a basic metaphysical system into something like a total map of reality. But this resemblance to modern ideals is not as close as it seems. First, Aristotle's sciences do not give all the facts. Most facts are what he would call "accidental": the color of your hair, the weight of this book. Aristotle believes there can be no science of the accidental fact; science studies the essences of things to find principles that are necessary and unchanging. Aristotle is not interested in the color of your hair except in so far as it might indicate something about

being human, or colored, or hair in general. So Aristotle's "map of reality" leaves out much that would interest us.

Also, his map works differently. The various sciences he sponsors do not connect directly. When we draw a map we expect regions to be contiguous, but for Aristotle the regions are not even on the same plane. The principles of one Aristotelian science are not derivable from those of another. Two of his sciences might discuss the same being, as the cow in the field can be studied as an animal in biology or as a changing being in what Aristotle calls physics, the general science of changeable things. But these two ways of studying the cow do not reduce to one basic treatment. There is no one language that will tell us all we need to know about the cow; Aristotle is not a reductionist. The principles of physics need to be amplified and specified in order to tell us about the cow as an animal. On the other hand, biology does not tell us how to find the more general principles of physics. Moderns presuppose that the last word will be delivered in one unified language. Aristotle's sciences speak a bundle of languages with analogies between them.

There is no one vocabulary for writing a report on all the facts.

Aristotle does have metaphysics. That highest science does talk about all that exists using the same principles concerning matter and form, actuality and potentiality, substance and the four causes. A cow, a poem, a man can all be discussed using this vocabulary. But on this level Aristotle has left aside what makes them different. Metaphysics is not a summary but an abstraction; a poem and a cow are not potential and actual in the same way. Nor does Aristotle provide us with a basic set of entities and relations that are to underlie everything. At most he gives us the prime examples of what it means to be, but to be a prime example is not to be basic in the way that electrons and photons are basic for us.

We want to understand things by reducing them to a realm of basic entities described in a basic language. Aristotle has a different project. We try to understand by discerning identical formal structure through a variety of instances. Aristotle does not do that, either, though his teacher Plato did. Aristotle finds analogous structures that are not purely formal and are not true of everything in precisely the same way.

The modern total last word would contain a continuous report in a univocal language that to us all the truth. A real being would be one that showed up in that final report. Aristotle takes whatever beings come to presence naturally and finds ways to talk about them in relation to first principles that operate analogously (that is, both the same and differently) in each region. He tells us how a poem embodies these principles, and

how a cow does. He is not so much writing a systematic report on everything true as he is bringing each kind of thing into the nearness of those first principles.

When he is explaining his methods Aristotle tells us that knowledge should be expressed in chains of syllogistic arguments. But his most important works have quite another form. They contain arguments, but the arguments are found within a shifting discourse that clarifies the concepts and leads us to the first principles. This is not just an expository convenience; we need this shifting discourse, itself without a firm structure of first principles. The shifting discourse locates the science amid its alternatives, gives it a bearing on our life, justifies our acceptance of its principles. The shifting discourse provides a medium in which we can come near to the first principles.

Aristotle does not see his scientific last word, such as it is, as settling our practical debates. For that we go to the man of practical wisdom who is good at making prudential decisions. The man of practical wisdom does not possess a special scientific knowledge. He cannot work from a special science because for Aristotle all sciences concern the necessary and essential features of things, about which no one deliberates or makes choices.

This separation of science from practical decision may sound familiar to us. Our standard modern picture has science setting forth an acknowledged public set of facts that provide a framework within which private interests and chosen values battle for policy influence. But Aristotle's separation is almost exactly the reverse of ours. What is private, for him, is scientific knowledge, which is possessed by an elite who have the leisure to study. What forms the public space of discussion is not scientific reporting but shared deliberation and concern for the common good.

### **Plato**

Turning from Aristotle to Plato may seem to bring us closer to the modern view. I claimed above that the analogous unity of Aristotle's sciences made his last word different from the standard modern one-level picture. Aristotle criticizes Plato for lacking a sense of analogy and trying to meld everything into one science with a mathematical basis. It sounds as if Plato fits better our standard picture. When we consider the ferocious education Plato suggests for his philosopher kings we may think Plato has put it all together in the modern mold: scientific politicians using the last word in knowledge to rule wisely.

This picture is half mistaken. The philosopher kings' education is not all that encyclopedic. Their studies emphasize skills, not factual content (*Republic* 521d). Plato

tells us (503e) that they must learn to abstract and contemplate, to move from becoming to being. They are taught to discern the necessary laws about the natures of things. Astronomy is useful for the calendar, but mostly is a vehicle for higher mathematics beyond what has practical value in commerce and military matters. Nor do the apprentice rulers study much theory about society beyond knowing its essential structures and divisions. They do not have a descriptive social science. What they do learn, in long years of apprentice administration, is how to apply general principles to particular cases. They learn, that is, to exercise prudence and practical wisdom.

Once they are trained they spend their time not in endless Socratic discussion but in administration. They make decisions about the size of the grain crop, the military situation, and who should marry whom. Their education helps them to decide not because they have some modern report on all the facts but because they have learned to see in each situation the matters that need measure, and to approach the forms that are the sources of harmonious measure.

If the work of the philosopher kings were merely to define the virtues and set up a general constitution, one Platonic Solon would suffice. If the forms were not relevant to daily decisions then at most an oversight group of philosophers would be needed to keep an eye on the general trend of events. In Plato's *Laws* the Nocturnal Council functions just that way, for in the city of the *Laws* philosophy is not involved in everyday decisions. But in the city of the *Republic* the philosopher kings attend to details. They do so not by consulting some cosmic encyclopedia but by taking the matters at hand into the nearness of the first principles, the forms that measure all things. This is the last word for Plato.

While there is a systematic interrelation to the realm of the forms, the use of this science is more occasional than systematic. Commentators who have wondered whether Platonic practical science would be a deductive ethics have missed the point. There was to be no finished dialectic. There was to be no book that said it all. We cannot underestimate this difference from our own standard ideals. Platonic practical science was not frozen and presented all at once; it was the perpetual activity of relating changing things to ever better understood first principles.

None of Plato's proposed cities were real, but his Academy was. Imagine the Academy at work: groups would be investigating regions of being, say geometry and biology, seeking their necessary principles. There would also be general conversation about the highest forms and common characteristics of all things (being, unity, goodness, sameness, difference, and so on). Members would try to relate the regions they were studying to those core principles. But this sounds suspiciously like *Aristotle's* picture of the

sciences. Where the Platonic enterprise differs is in a greater emphasis on methods of conceptual division and on the goal of deriving the principles of the various regions from the core forms by some quasi-mathematical process. This goal might have led to a rationalist total science, but it remained only a background hope.

So the general Academic activity was not the development of a modern system of the world but a movement from particular regions to the core principles and then back to a purified version of the region under study. There seems to have been little attempt to devise one language for reporting a total picture. Indeed the one work of Plato's that most closely approaches our ideal of a total picture, the *Timaeus*, is expressly denied the status of scientific knowledge.

### **The Sophists**

Plato's unified science was to show forth the necessary connections among the forms that defined the essence of reality. Matters at hand would have been brought near the explored forms for illumination and measurement. Decisions could then be made on how to achieve a moving harmony that imaged the unity of the forms. Aristotle objected to the tight unity of Plato's central knowledge, and he denied the practical efficacy of approaching the forms to seek measures. Exploring the essences of things afforded for Aristotle the highest intellectual satisfaction, but no practical guidance.

Understanding the reasons why Plato and Aristotle differed on the practical impact of the speculative last word takes us into Greek culture. There are philosophical reasons, to be sure, having to do with different conceptions of causality and of the relation of the universal to the particular. But I want to emphasize a social reason for the disagreement between Plato and Aristotle, because it brings to light a problem about last words.

I deliberately described the Platonic scientist in a way which makes him (or her!) sound like someone consulting an oracle. Take your problem into the nearness of the highest, and emerge bearing an answer. Behind the Platonic scientist lie Empedocles, the poem of Parmenides, and a line of seers approaching the archaic origins. In our world we worry about the tension between the politician and the scientist. Before that came the tension between the king and the prophet, the tribal leader and the shaman, Oedipus and Tiresias. Tiresias, near to the origins, possesses dark wisdom and pronounces last words. Oedipus, the man of deeds, is qualified by past experience to deal with present problems.

The uneasy interaction between these two breaks down about the time of Socrates. We might see this as a collapse of traditional modes of legitimation of both oracles and leaders. New sources of power are discovered in trade and the economy, and in the new

instrument of rhetoric. Plato describes "a little bald-headed tinker who has made money and just been freed from bonds and had a bath and is wearing a new garment and has got himself up like a bridegroom and is about to marry his master's daughter who has fallen into poverty and abandonment" (*Republic* 465e). The nouveaux riches are pushing out the old clansmen; the old sources of power are being undermined.

With the advent of money and sophistry anyone could have power, anyone could have the last word. No longer could one be sure the leader was near to the gods. Plato grew up amid this change. He sought for a new legitimation, a guaranteed last word that could not be bought. This word would not be guaranteed in the old way, from its source in some special person. It would be guaranteed because it was anonymous, because it came from no one in particular and was available to anyone willing to undertake the discipline of approaching the forms that were the true origins of things. The philosopher king was not to speak from personal charisma or persuasive skill, but from a source independent of his or anyone's particular desires. That word would be spoken and received out of a desire deeper than our idiosyncratic loves, from a level where we are and seek the same.

To make this possible Plato had to beat out the Sophists. *But he also had to remove Tiresias*; there can be no unique person whose mystic anointing brings him near to the dark heart of reality. One move will banish both the Sophists and Tiresias. To put it mythically: in Homer, Zeus has the last word; he ends the disputes among the gods. But behind him are the Fates, shadowy presences who spin and weave and cut--but they do not speak. Theirs is the last move, but they have no word. An opaqueness clouds the origins of things.

Compare this with the tenth book of Plato's *Laws*, which decrees harsh opposition to Democritus and others who would affirm ultimate opacity. Plato makes the archaic origins available to speaking. It may be difficult, he says, but it is possible to see and to say. This provides a last word that is neither yours nor mine. Thus there is no room for the Sophists, since the sayable forms will banish relativism and scheming. Nor is there any room for Tiresias; if there is mysticism in Plato it is not of the dark.

Plato's philosopher kings were to bring this word to bear as a measure for life. Aristotle agrees that the origins of things can be seen and spoken, but he does not claim that they can define our practice. His man of practical wisdom does not have a word but a skill, a virtue, almost the knack that Plato feared in the Sophists.

Why does Aristotle not fear the Sophists? Plato saw in them symptoms of our deep weakness, our ability to put a false image in place of the truth and hide from ourselves

even the need for a question. Aristotle seems to find them faintly amusing specimens to be botanized for mistakes and tricks in arguments. Is it only that Aristotle, being younger and not an Athenian, had not experienced the tragedies that unbridled rhetoric brought on Athens during the Peloponnesian war? Or was it that society had changed in the intervening years and the Sophists were no longer serious professional rivals to the philosophers?

Perhaps both of these are true, but I think there is a deeper reason that points to a flaw in the Platonic program for scientific politics. Plato's hope for an effective last word demands that people be converted. Socrates gave his life trying to make people stop and think and talk. If they could be brought to see that their own words lacked foundation they might find that their desire for wholeness drove them to join the search for the origins of things. Since "it is impossible that a multitude be philosophical," people must be pulled out of the multitude's shared certainty. But Socrates cannot talk to every one by one to dissolve the multitude and reconstitute it as a community joined in the Socratic quest. This impossibility reduced Plato to the dream of catching the multitude before it formed, banishing adults and raising the children to philosophy.

The last word remains politically impotent. Plato's adventures in Syracuse show that the philosophers' group can only appear as one more cabal. Plato wrote the *Laws* for this real world where wisdom can be at most the goal of a small elite and the ruler's main qualification must be prudence, not philosophy. What we know of the political activities carried on by the Academy fits this pattern.

This leaves Plato's project turning in the shifting discourse that seeks origins, with elite groups pursuing various incomplete sciences that relate only partially to one another, and with practical decisions left to prudence and a purified rhetoric. This leaves Plato, in short, with Aristotle.

Perhaps not quite. In Plato what I have called the shifting discourse stands out more strongly than in Aristotle. Though his ideals for scientific achievement are more grandiose, Plato's text is less sure than Aristotle's. I do not mean the textual descriptions of the ideal, but the actual wandering dialogues, a discourse without fixed starting points or first principles. While the dialogues announce beginnings and origins, they themselves do not stand firm. Any fixed position must be arrived at through the shifting discourse; we start nowhere special except where we are. That discourse had its own drive; it pushes people around; yet it obeys no fixed rules, refusing to be methodical or literal in its pursuit of literal method. It is not a partial science, yet it surrounds and renders accessible even the hope of science. In its own way it has the last word.

Perhaps it still does. Modernity seeks the total uniform system; the Greeks did otherwise, even though they are our ancestors. Modernity wanted universal theory to illuminate private choices; Aristotle wanted shared choices to culminate in a life of private theory. But modern total science is not our last word any more, if it ever really was. We, perhaps postmodern, are caught in the shifting discourse, building without firm starting points and with no sure direction in which to seek the origins that slip away from us. Perhaps everyone has always been in the shifting discourse, whatever else they have said.