

DOES ARISTOTLE BELIEVE IN LIBERATION ?

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This paper is an attempt to answer a very important question, that is, 'Does Aristotle believe in liberation?'. Soul and matter are the two co-eternal principles of reality in Aristotle's philosophy, yet the role of soul is supreme and to realise the supremacy of soul is ultimate in Aristotle's philosophy. It is no exaggeration to say that the entire philosophy of Aristotle is a conscious endeavour to establish the supremacy of soul over matter and to liberate the soul from the limitations of matter. The question arises then, 'what do we actually mean by liberation?' Before establishing my thesis, I would like to state in brief, what we actually mean by liberation, which is as follows :

By liberation we mean certain limitations overcome by the knowledge of the self. It is setting the self free from the material superstructure it is subjected to i.e., liberation can come only through the true discrimination between soul and matter. This liberation from material nature is the immediate goal of soul. The quest for liberation, together with its awareness of bondage is a necessity in any dualistic philosophy. Liberation is thus, first of all, the separation of the soul from its bodily limitation. This entails a certain kind of discrimination between the self and the body. And since, body in its wider sense represents everything that is material, the discrimination of the self from the body is to be understood as the separation of the self from the material universe. A minimum degree of discrimination is, therefore, necessary to set off on the path of liberation. My endeavour in this paper is to explain in what way Aristotle establishes the supremacy of the soul over matter, by liberating the soul from the bondage of matter, This I propose to do as follows :

Aristotle is eager to find out the exact nature of the *first cause* and he states in his metaphysics that, *it is of being as such*, that we must grasp the first philosophy.

What is being? In his *Metaphysics*¹ Aristotle takes his first philosophy as a science of 'being' as '*being as such*' and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature. '*Being*', he states, could be understood as follows : i. as a particular of the verb, '*to be*' it signifies the same as *existence* and ii. as *noun*, signifies whatever actually has existence in no matter what way whether actually or possibly either from itself or from another etc. (being and qua being) i. e., whatever has some essence and whatever is '*not nothing*'. We are using both, in the second sense here, because this definition is wider. The question arises, 'what do we mean by the notion of being? We mean by the notion of being the following:

Being is - i, Something which is most *abstracted from the senses*, because through the notion of being our intellect represents to itself what is common to all things, without pointing to itself those special determinations by which things are differentiated among themselves., ii, *is most easily known*, and is distinguished from nothing., iii, *most simple*, because it expresses a list which can be grasped about a thing, namely that, which is not nothing and therefore, cannot be divided into any other simple notions. iv, *strictly universal*, the greatest extension, because it expresses in what can be predicated of all things. v, *first in the logical order*, in so far, all other ideas are just as many determinations and modifications of being, when the notion of form is included in all others, and these others are ultimately resolved into the notion of form or being., vi, *first also in the chronological order*, in as much as it is the idea which the intellect furnishes to itself before all others. Hence, it can be both *apriori* and *a posteriori*. *Apriori*, because our intellect, since it proceeds from more imperfect and indeterminate acts or ideas, must begin from the idea of being which is more imperfect and more indeterminate of all ideas. *Aposteriori*, because, it is evident from experience that concerning something we first know that the thing is a form or being, then one after another we acquire notions of the same thing and, thus by degrees, our ideas become less imperfect and indeterminate.

What follows from the above is that, being is predicated of all things analogically, by similarity, because all things are similar in being something and in being opposed to nothing. Then, 'What is being?' Aristotle's answer is that to be determinable means determinable by an attribute and whatever is determinable by an attribute is being existent. And to be determinable is to be determinable in discourse. Thus, *whatever can be brought about in discourse has being*.

What Aristotle actually means by determinability of objects by attribute in discourse is that the indispensable property or the essential properties which can be talked about in discourse. The question arises 'what are the essential property or the indispensable properties'? Aristotle's answer is that essential properties are those properties by reference to which an object is conceived to be of such and such a kind and is determinable in discourse. Aristotle, in *Topica* states that, attributes of an object form part of that object's essence (and properties and essentially attached to it), so to say that, they are what make the object what they are or providing 'being', for 'to be' is to be something or other. What are the essential properties of a physical thing? Aristotle answers the essential properties are those properties which enable things to exist as physical things.

Essence is usually declared by stating that, it is that by which something first is being, or that by which, something is differentiated from other things, or the collection of perfections strictly necessary for constituting and understanding the things that by which a thing is what it is. Aristotle says "The essence of a thing is that which it is said to be 'per se'. 'What is essence then'? From the foregoing discussion, essence could be characterised as follows :

(i) *Whatness*, because through essence we answer what the thing is., (ii) *form*, because through essence a thing is constituted in its own proper formal, specific being., (iii) *reason* of the thing, because through essence a thing is understood or explained. (iv) *substance*, because essence is the foundation holding up of other beings, that is accidenta. (v) *nature*, essence is the principle from which come all properties and operations.

Essence is both *physical* and *metaphysical*. *Essence is physical*,

because, without the physical essence (without the physical elements constituting things) the thing could not exist. How could vegetables and animals exist without their proper matter and their proper soul (principles of life?). *Essence is metaphysical*, because, it is found concretely and fundamentally in all things as to that which is represented and is independent of the mind, in so far as, it is something concretely and singularly existing in all individuals of the same class or species.

The question arises 'in what does a thing's essence consists?' According to the proper usage of the term, Aristotle states that, in fact 'essence' belongs to, (a) : just as what a thing is, does, primarily and simply to substance, and (b) : to the other categories, being in this case not essence, in the full sense, but the sense of a quality, quantity etc. 'What is essence then?' 'Is essence definable'? Aristotle says that, substance alone is definable and essence belongs only to substance or to them alone in the proper primary and unqualified sense and so it is manifested that "definition is the formula of essence",. 'Does the essence of a thing consist in its substance? Aristotle's answer is that, it is because of essence the how and why of a thing comes to be what it is. Normally, the essence of a thing is its final cause, or in other words 'essence' consists in form. The essence of a thing consists in the form it has achieved, and achieved form is actually realised in a concrete thing. Thus, the concrete individual object is the essence, that is substance for Aristotle.

'What exactly is substance'? In the words of Aristotle, "The word *being* has a variety of senses which are listed in my Treatise on the several meanings of words? It denotes first 'what a thing is', (i.e., its individuality), and then, its quality, quantity, or other category. Not all of these which 'being' may have, the primary sense is clearly 'what a thing is', for this denotes substance"³ and it is by virtue of substance that each of the other categories 'exist'. Therefore, "that which is "primary (i.e. not in any qualified sense, but absolutely) must be substance"⁴.

Aristotle calls substance as primary on the following grounds. He states, "while there are several senses in which a thing may be described as 'primary', substance is so in every one of them : *in definition, in knowledge and in time*. It is primary in the definition, because the definition

of a substance is involved in the definitions of everything else; in knowledge, because we know a thing best when we know what it is, and not simply its quality, quantity, position etc. and in time, because substance alone among the categories can exist apart.”⁵

Thus an answer to the question ‘what is being?’ is an answer to the question ‘what is substance?’ It was substance that many of the early philosophers described as one or many, as numerically finite or infinite; so that it must be our first and principal”.⁶ Aristotle’s answer is that, *it is because of essence*, the how and why of thing comes to be what it is. Normally, the essence of a thing is its final cause or in other words, essence consists in form. The essence of a thing consists in the form that it has achieved, and achieved form is actually realised in a concrete thing and the concrete individual object is the essence that is substance for Aristotle.

In Aristotelian terminology substance means : i) The simple bodies (earth, fire, water and all such things), and bodies generally and the things composed of them, living creatures as well as the stars and their parts. All these are called ‘substances’ because they are not predicated of them. ii) The immanent cause of being in the foregoing class of beings, as the soul is the being of animals. iii) The parts immanent in such things, defining them and making them out as individual, and by the destruction of which the whole is destroyed. iv) The essence, whose formula is definition.⁷

From the above characterisation of ‘being’, ‘essence’ and ‘substance’ it follows that, whatever thing is being has essence, and whatever thing has essence is the substance and it is by virtue of substance that each of the other categories ‘exists’.⁸ And whatever thing has essence, that thing consists in form. The essence of a thing consists in the form it has achieved and achieved form is actually realised in a concrete thing. Therefore, *form is one of the fundamental principles in Aristotle’s metaphysics by means of which he seeks to explain the entire universe*. And, hence, it is necessary that we must understand its nature thoroughly.

According to Aristotle, form is the essence or the primary substance and hence forms are substantial. Things increase in actuality by acquiring form. Matter without form is potentiality. Individual beings as real substances are constituted under the control or direction of form. Forms are universal

features common to all things and are eternal. Forms are of two types i) Immaterial and ii) Material. Immaterial, though related to matter, nevertheless, do not depend on matter in their being. Material, matter does not always preserve and keep the same identity, same form, but change them and lose certain form to obtain new form. Such forms are never subsisting and depend on matter for their being. The material non-subsisting forms are corruptible and when separated from matter, they immediately perish actually, and return to the potency of matter. The immaterial subsisting forms when separated from matter they survive.

‘What is matter then?’ Aristotle recognises matter as substance, for in all change from one opposite to another, it is matter which underlies the change - e.g., in respect of place, in respect of size, in respect of quality. Similarly, in respect of substance, it is matter which is now in course of generation and now in course of destruction. In course of destruction, it underlines the process as the individual thing, in the case of generation as the privation of positive character. Aristotle offers the following items to indicate that, they have matter. These are substances in the sense of i) matter (which is potentially a ‘this’); ii) the definition or shape (which is a ‘this’ and is separable in definition); and iii) the union of these two, (which alone is subject to generation and destruction, and is capable of separate existence in the full sense).

The last kind of change, involves all the others. The principle of change is matter. ‘Why?’. His basic consideration is that, once it is so recognised that there must be something that changes, it must also be recognised that in order for it to change, that something must be such as to be able to change or become different. And it is such an ability and capacity or potentiality for being other and different that Aristotle calls matter.⁹ For him, matter is simply potentiality and potentiality, in turn, is always constructed as a potentiality for something or other. That potentiality Aristotle would call material thing or substance. Without matter the things and substances of the world would never change. Aristotle states that, matter is potentiality and is eternal, unproductive and gives uniqueness to substances. Matter *per se* inheres in all things and is absolute and is devoid of all qualities. It is moreover indefinite and qualityless mass.

Theoretically, matter and form are opposed but in real practice they co-exist. still, the *essential whatness of every material object is form not matter*. The reason of differentiation between different objects is form not matter, because, *it is in virtue of form, that matter is some one definite thing*. Matter as conceived by Aristotle "is not self sufficient....it is matter which is inseparable from form, co-existent with it. Matter assumes different form, one form following another, the form first it had does not change into another form but a new form fashions the matter".¹⁰

In the words of Aristotle "It is precisely matter which differentiates individuals".¹¹

Reality is a plurality of individual substances each of which is a fusion of form and matter. These substances are ordered in a continuous series according to the pre-domination of form over matter. Individual beings as real substances are constituted under the control or direction of form. Matter changes, form does not change, it is the principle of permanence.

Therefore, form has the following characteristics. i) *essential whatness* of any object; because the becoming of the matter is determined by form. ii) *substance*, because it is the actualisation of the material body. iii) *universal*, because, form pervades in all things. iv) *chief* in virtue of form matter is some one definite thing. Matter is the possibility of form. v) *principle of permanence*, and *existence*, form is without motion and change and is therefore, existence. vi) *first grade of actuality* of a natural and potential body. Therefore, form is the origin of movement, the essence of matter, the being and the end. Form is the very life of the body, and therefore, form is the cause, that incite activities and motion into matter but by itself does not move. It is the unmoved mover.

"It is obvious then, from what I have said, that the thing in the sense of form or essence is not produced; that the concrete thing; which gets its name from form is produced; that matter is present in whatever comes into being; and that one part of any such thing is matter, another form"¹²

The specific determination of things are simply forms. *Form is not made, nor does production apply to it*. The specific determination of all things is form, 'what is soul then?' Aristotle is eager to find out an answer

to this question. *Form being defined by Aristotle as the principle of determinacy in things*, in virtue of which each sort of thing is a kind of thing that '*it is*' and not some other kind, to such substantial forms as are determinate of living things. being the sort of things they are, Aristotle simply gives the name of psyche or soul.

A soul is a substantial form, the 'what it is' of a certain kind of thing, moreover, that of which the soul is thus the 'what' or, the substantial form can only be the body. Human being is only a kind of substance with a distinctive soul, namely, an intellectual or rational soul. To say that, a substance has a rational soul is to say that it is informed by a substantial form which is at once the formal, final and efficient cause of what are the characteristic human functions and activities - distinct from plants and animals, all those functions which are distinctive of and peculiar to man, rational knowledge and cognition.

In general, thus, soul may be regarded as a form in virtue of which the body is the particular kind of body, *that it is*, and so able to perform the characteristic functions that are appropriate to it. In other words, soul is the essence, the effect, the determinate nature of the body. Soul has a causal role to play and the soul must be the formal cause of that of which it is the substantial form. And if soul is the formal cause it is also the efficient cause or the moving cause as well, because, it brings developmental change internally. A moving cause is an action of an agent upon, is thereby in process of being changed and the changes are changes in the bodies, not in the soul.

Apparently then, it appears that *soul is both the formal cause as well as the efficient cause and the final cause*. Hence, the soul as the substantial form of a living body serves no less as the final cause than as the moving cause of the various characteristic changes that living or animante bodies undergo. And so, the entire doctrine of the causal role of the soul is summed up by Aristotle in the words :

"The soul is the cause or source of the living body. The terms cause and source have many senses. But the soul is the cause of its body in all three senses which we actually recognize. It is (a) the source or origin of movement, it (b) the end, it is (c) substance (in the sense

of substantial form) of the whole living body".¹³

Soul is the cause of the body in three recognised senses. These are; i. the *essence* of the whole living body, ii. *the source or the origin of movement* iii. it is *the end*, all accidents depend on a substance in the sense of the form of a natural body having life potentiality within it. It is substance in the sense which corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing's essence. That means, *it is the essential whatness of a body of the character just assigned*.

According to Aristotle, soul has two distinctive features namely; intellectual and causal. *The intellectual part* of the soul is what it is because it becomes all things, and there is another part that is *what it is* because it makes all things. That it is the cause or agent only in the manner in which light produces colours by falling upon objects, i. e., as the sun is the cause of the light on earth without it is really acting with purpose in respect to the earth.

To establish the superiority of the soul Aristotle writes : "this intellect is separable and impassive and unmade, being in its essential nature and activity. For that which acts is superior to that which is acted upon, and constitutes the cause of matter".¹⁴

After much investigation Aristotle concludes that, the soul must be the substance in the sense of form of a natural body having life potentiality within it, and if substance is actuality, *the soul must be the actuality of the body* and as *the possessor of knowledge soul is pure thought*.

'What is body then?' Aristotle states that, from matter and substantial form joined together, there arises a substantial composite, namely a body. In living beings, the material principle that is thus co-relative with the soul or form is simply the body. The relation between soul and body is the same as the relation between form and matter. The body is organic body and is separable of life or may be said to be potentially alive.

Body can be characterised as follow :

i) The body property has *being and existence*. Matter and form so exist that only in the composites they are mutually completed. Matter and form are co-existence. ii) Body property is the *substance* for form and matter are the only substantial principle, incomplete substances. iii) body is

the *principle of all operations and properties*. iv) body is *what is properly change* i.e., generate and corrupt. For generation and corruption consists only in substantial change, in fact, matter of somebody acquiring a new specific form, having lost that which it had before.

'What is the cause of motion in matter, the actualisation of motion in matter? Aristotle answers that, the actualisation of the world becomes possible through the dynamism and motion released in matter, and the diversity of the worldly objects, are due to different proportions of matter and form in various objects. However, the initial push for motion is provided to matter by *Pure Form*. *is the Prime Mover of the world*, the final cause of nature, the drive and purpose of things, the form of the world, the principle of its life, the sum of its vital processes, the internal growing of its growth, the energizing entelechy of the whole; '*this is pure Ontology*'.

Everything is guided by certain direction from within, by its nature and structure and entelecheia having (echo) its purpose (telos) within (ontos). This design is internal and arises from the type and function of the thing. In this ascending series from potentiality to actuality there is a progressive realisation of a greater preponderance of form over matter.

Thus the distinction between form and matter is the distinction between potentiality to actuality and this distinction is parallel. When a thing has reached its growth, it has realised its meaning, its purpose and form. The form and soul is the true being, its realisation and completion. Aristotle states "Further we have no light on the problem whether the soul may not be the actuality of the body in the sense in which the sailor is the actuality of the ship"¹⁵

As to the relation between soul and body Aristotle says that, the soul plus the body constitutes the animal. Body and soul are inseparable, or at least certain parts are not inseparable. The possibility of separation is due to the fact of the actuality of some parts of the soul, being nothing more than the actuality or potentiality of that part. Again some can be separated because they are not the actuality of its body in the sense in which the sailor is the actuality of the ship.

In another chapter of *De Anima* Aristotle describes the mind and its functions. The soul is equated with the mental life of an individual. The discussion above seems to equate form and soul. In his discussion of mind

Aristotle says "mind must be related to which is thinkable, as sense to the sensible".¹⁶ Why Aristotle says so is that thinking is a process in which soul is acted upon by the thinkable, directly or indirectly. Thus, the intellectual part of the soul, which is impassible, is regarded as capable of receiving the form of an object, or at any rate it must be potentially identical with the character of the object but not with the object. Aristotle says that, the soul is the cause or the essence of the living body. *Mind is not perishable but is more Divine and impassive*. Body is perishable.

The intellectual part of the soul is what it is because it makes all things. Aristotle states "this intellect is separable and impassive and unmixed, being in its essential nature an activity. For that which acts is always superior to that which is acted upon and constitutes the cause of matter".¹⁷

Aristotle further states that, the actual knowledge is identical with things which are known and potential knowledge is prior in time to actual knowledge for the individual, but not in the universe at large. The active intellect, does not at one time know and at another not know. In his own words :

"Only in separation from matter is it what it really is, and this (its essential nature) is alone immortal and eternal. But we do not remember, because the reason of which we are in separation is impassive, while the intellect which can be affected is perishable, and without the former does not think at all".¹⁸

Aristotle feels the need of realising the inner being of man, because this realisation identifies the inner being with purity, which is pure activity (*actus purus*) and this realisation is important because this realisation leads towards liberation. But this realisation is not possible as long as the soul is confined by the matter. The immortality and eternity of the soul is realised only when it is free from the limitations of the world. That time the soul attains purity and without this realisation the soul is lifeless and unthinking matter. This realisation is a kind of unity or the realisation of an actuality to that which it is the actuality.

'What is liberation then?' Liberation is not union with god but to realise the process of God. When the realisation of the soul is more perfect

thus brings about liberation. Liberation can come only through the true discrimination between form and matter by ratiocination.

The main philosophical concept of Aristotle is to obtain the liberation or the freedom of the soul from the bondage of the matter. Returning again to the *Ethics* and to the life of contemplation that seems to be recommended in the concluding book Aristotle says :

".....where the activity of the intellect is felt to excel in serious worth, consisting as it does in contemplation, and to aim at no end beyond itself, and also to contain a pleasure peculiar to itself, and therefore, augmenting its activity..."¹⁹

"Such a life as this however will be higher than the human level : not in virtue of its humanity will a man achieve it, but in virtue of something within him that is divine, and by as much as this something is superior to the exercise of the other forms of virtue. If then the intellect is something divine in comparison with man, so is the life of the intellect divine in comparison with human life... but we ought so far as possible to achieve immortality, and do all that man may to live in accordance with the highest thing in him, for though this be small in bulk, in power and value it far surpasses all the rest".²⁰

NOTES

1. Aristotle's *Metaphysics* - Edited and translated by John Warrington, Everyman's Library, New York.
2. *Ibid.*, - p, 173
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, - p, 167
5. *Ibid.*, - p, 167 - 65.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, - p, 168.
8. *Ibid.*, - p, 18
9. *Ibid.*, - p, 167

10. Henry. B. Veatch - *Aristotle : A Contemporary Appreciation*. Indiana University Press. London. p. 33. 1974
11. Will Durant - *The Story of Philosophy*. Pocket Books. New York. 1961. p, 70.
12. *Metaphysics* - *op. cit.*, p, 186.
13. *Ibid.*, - p, 180
14. Aristotle's *De Anima* - 11, 4, 1507 - 11 Oxford translation slightly amended.
15. *Ibid.*, - p, 95.
16. Francis. V Catalina - *The Study of Self Concept in Samkhya- Yoga Philosophy*, Munsiram Manoharlal. Delhi 1924 p, 93.
17. Richard McKeon (ed) - *The Basic works of Aristotle*. (New York) Random House. 1941. p. 55.
18. F. V. Catalina *op. cit.*, p, 95.
19. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*- X, 7, 177b 18-21. (Loeb Library, Rackham translation).
20. *Ibid.*, 1177-26-1178a 18-21.

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