

PLATO [SOCRATES], ARISTOTLE
AND CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY

RUNNING HEAD: Plato, Aristotle, Psychology

David Johnston

ABSTRACT

This essay is about the similarities and differences between the philosophies of the two principle fathers of Western philosophy, Plato [Socrates], Aristotle and contemporary psychology. It is very evident that Depth-psychology, particularly Jungian but also Freudian, mainly follow on the line of Plato. Both Freud and Plato esteem reason as a way to come to terms with the unruly energies contained in what Freud referred to as the id and Plato, the wild beast in our nature. Plato also saw the need for laws to help contain humankind's wildness, while Freud, coming out of a repressed Victorian age, saw the need for reason to mediate between the id and the overly repressive ideals and morality of the superego. Regarding Jung, the similarity is essentially based on the common significance of Jungian archetypes and Platonic ideas. The essential difference between Jung and Plato is that Jung's archetypes are psychoid and contain and go beyond both spirit and matter, while Plato's ideas are only substantial in the realm of the spirit if not only thought. Although Aristotle can legitimately be understood to be the father of scientific psychology, both his scientific attitude and influence on alchemy link him indirectly, if not directly, to Jung. In fact Jung's approach to psychology can be understood to be a reconciliation of Western thought and the redemption of matter

PLATO [SOCRATES], ARISTOTLE
AND CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY

Introduction

During fourth century BCE Athens, the foundations were laid for the two main lines of thought that have since most influenced life in the Western world. The seed for one of the most profoundly powerful moulding forces on the Occidental psyche was planted by Aristotle, the father of the philosophy of science [1]. His tough-minded attitude dominated thinking from his demise in 322 BCE through the rise of Roman power until the Dark Ages. Later, from the Renaissance to the present day, his thought has once again exerted a powerful influence. Christianity and even Alchemy, via Aquinas and others, have been imprinted since the thirteenth century C. E. with the stamp of Aristotle.

Socrates and Plato, too, have left a formidable formative impression on the affairs of the Western mind. The so-called Dark Ages shone more brilliantly thanks to the Platonic sun. Nonetheless, despite their influence on philosophy in general and Neoplatonism in particular, and, especially through Augustine, their influence on Christianity and the structure of society in the middle ages, Socrates and Plato and have been relegated to a compensatory position in the Occidental myth [1][2].

Today, a potent argument can be advanced that Socrates and Plato are the fathers of depth-psychology while Aristotle is the father of scientific psychology.

Although this is a more or less accurate assessment, to do justice to the thought of each of these great men, I prefer not to make such a radical division. Indeed, mainly Plato and Socrates but also Aristotle find their fulfilment in depth-psychology. At the same time, scientific psychology may one day acknowledge a debt to Plato and Socrates.

The phenomena of a Socrates-Plato and an Aristotle are most profitably studied in light of the consciousness of their day. They are each a product of a society gradually emerging from a world ruled by a deficient ambiguous mythology and its pandemonium of gods and goddesses of the "life-world" into a world of the intellect [3]. War, chaotic government and disintegrating individualism, a result of the Sophist's dethronement of the gods, created a need to find order through reason [2]. The Greeks of the day were undisciplined and disorganised thinkers. First Socrates and Plato, then Aristotle illuminated their world and showed them how the mind can bring order into individual life and society. The development of the intellect contained a numinous charge for the early disciples of these masters.

Plato and Depth-Psychology

The situation today is different. Individuation requires a conscious return to the mythological perspective--and beyond, for an inner relationship to the archetype and the Self and a sense of wholeness. Socrates and Plato were closer to mythology and the mystery of life than Aristotle and are therefore particularly relevant to depth-psychology. In this light, it is significant that Plato's dialogues on the soul and inner experiences are the cornerstone of his philosophy. Indeed, his assertion that reality consists of eternal forms or ideas is, according to Jung's own admission, similar to the latter's concept of the archetype [4]. However, for Plato, knowledge comes through recollection and contemplation of the idea, particularly of Beauty subsumed by the Good whereas, with Jung, it comes through conscious experience of archetypal representations, which are as varied as life itself [5] [4]. Plato's contention that *one* of the two opposing principles at work in the universe is errant necessity [*ananke*], nonetheless, suggests that personality integration often comes by way of the necessity of aimless errancy and error, which is a position held by Jung and archetypal psychology [6].

In addition, Plato's tripartite character typology relates, however imperfectly, to Jung's fourfold structure. Plato's typology consists of the intellect, the spirit with courage and ambition, along with the attending emotions, and the appetites or desires [5]. In his view, one or the other mode tends to dominate the personality, although he gives primacy and value preference to the intellect and then the embodiment of courage and

ambition. In this regard, Plato's aristocratic understanding of the human soul also agrees with Jung's observation that nature and the unconscious is naturally aristocratic [7].

Jung's typology consists of four functions of consciousness, thinking, feeling, sensation and intuition along with two attitudes, extroversion and introversion [8]. In his view, one or two functions and one attitude generally tend to dominate the personality although the individuation process, as described by Jung, ultimately aims at wholeness and the integration of all four functions of consciousness and the two attitudes. Although Jung believes in the aristocratic nature of the psyche, contrary to Plato, he was loath to declare that one attitude or one function of consciousness was superior to any other.

Finally, Plato's theory of dreams is uncannily similar to that of Freud's [2]. According to Durant, in Plato's theory of dreams one finds elements of Freud's understanding of sublimation, the censor, and the Oedipus complex [2]. In addition, I will add, there are also notions similar to the ego and the superego, for instance in "control of law and reason" as well as the id, referred to as the "wild beast in our nature". Although Plato's understanding of the nature of reason was more elevated and all-encompassing than Freud's more Victorian variety, his appeal to rule one's life through reason can be equated to Freud's appeal to rule by way of an ego based on reason. Plato also saw the necessity for the control of law which can, when internalised, be related to Freud's

superego. Reason and control by law were required to come to terms with the “wild beast in our nature,” just as, for Freud, humankind developed the superego and the ego to come to terms with the id. Whereas during Plato’s time there was a need to come to terms with unruly energy through reason and law, during Freud’s time there was considerable repression and a superego that was too severe. His realised individual was therefore enjoined to live through reason, which acted as a mediator between the superego and its demands and the desires of the id.

Another major connection that can be made between depth-psychology and Plato’s thought concerns the philosopher’s dialogues or “beautiful” conversations and Freud’s “talking cures,” each of which in their own day were means to induce healing. Needless to say, there is a significant difference in form between the two approaches. Plato worked through the dialectical process, which may have begun with dialogue, but usually ended in a didactic monologue. Freud, meanwhile, worked with the analysand’s dreams, free associations and personal memory recollections, albeit interpreted through the lens of his own theoretical assumptions.

In fact, the Socratic approach strikes me as being more prototypal of Albert Ellis’ rational-emotive therapy than Freud’s “talking cure”. In this approach, the therapist attempts to lead the analysand through reason from destructive cognitions to insight and behavioural change [9]. In his dialogues, Plato also progressed from the refutation

of the value of opinion to bewilderment [*aporia*] to recollection and knowledge of the good, to insight and right living [5]. From a Jungian perspective, these dialogues, in fact, an inner conversation between different parts of Plato's mind [5], resemble a form of active imagination, what Robert Johnson refers to as a horse trading in ideas [10].

In addition to the dialectic process and *mania* Plato saw *Eros* and *Thanatos* as being integral to personality formation, with death as his deepest concern [6]. Such a view finds resonance in both the theories of Freud and those of Jung. Jung, however, took these notions far deeper than Freud, and his approach alone really merits comparison to that of the ancient Greek. *Eros* refers to love and the binding and loosening of relationship. *Thanatos* is the quality of death, which, in archetypal psychology, refers to death of defensive ego positions and attachment to life, and gradual psychological preparation for physical death itself. In this regard, it is interesting to take note of Socrates last words after having imbibed the poisonous hemlock. They were: "Crito I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?" [2]. The cock was the standard tribute for healing. The philosopher's message can be understood, then, as being that death is the healing and embracing death cures. This, too, is the finding of archetypal psychology as, incidentally, is the need for the realisation of Plato's fourth requirement for the soul, *mania* or madness, that which carries, "with enthusiasm," one beyond the norms and socially constructed patterns of society.

Aristotle and Contemporary Psychology

Aristotle and Depth-Psychology

Aristotle was the necessary compensatory response to Plato. At best, the latter regarded the visible objects through the senses as a faint representation of the eternal ideas, a relative reality. Sense reliance on visible things, he argued, gives opinion [*doxa*] based on illusion [*eikasia*] or, at best, belief [*pistis*]. Reasoning [*dianoia*] based on hypotheses, assumption and inference, he believed, gives knowledge, while abstract reasoning [*noesis*] leads from hypothesis to ultimate principles and knowledge of the Good itself [5]

Aristotle reversed matters finding reality in things [*res*] and only name [*nomina*] or mental abstraction in universal ideas [2]. The alchemists, who in the best of cases were genuine seekers, were influenced by the philosopher's concept of primary matter differentiated through specific forms [11]. As Jung's spiritual ancestors are the alchemists, there is, consequently, an indirect, if not direct, link between Aristotelian doctrines and Jung's approach to depth-psychology. Indeed, Aristotle's concern about the visible world and sensation is significant, related as it is to sensation, one of Jung's four functions of consciousness, and his concern for realisation of the chthonic spirit.

In addition, Aristotle's stress on the individual, his notion of *entelechea*, that is having [*echo*] its purpose [*telos*] within [*entos*], strikes a responsive note in Jung's

understanding of individuation as self-directed teleology [13]. In fact, Aristotle's notion of entelechea is based on his interpretation of the Greek golden mean, and allows little room for excess. From the point of view of the contemporary individual this understanding of individuation is too tightly defined and far too narrow. Indeed, in contrast to the Aristotelian entelechea, for Jung, teleology is directed from the Self, one's centre of being and wholeness, and may, at times involve excess. This consideration aside, individuation does not take place atop Mount Everest, or simply by contemplating the Good and the Beautiful, it happens through life involvement, ethical decisions and awareness of the incarnation of the archetype. Related to this, the soul's need for catharsis or purification, is a fundamental principal of depth-psychology as it was for Aristotle.

Even the philosopher's scientific attitude relates directly to depth-psychology. The psyche, argues Jung, is objective and the individuation process involves an intense scrutiny of this reality on an individual basis [7]. Observations of dreams, active imagination and synchronistic inner and outer events require this attitude.

Aristotle and Scientific Psychology

But it is Aristotle's scientific positivism that justifies appointing him the father of scientific psychology, whether it be empirical, like cognitive psychology and behaviourism or the study of psycho-biological processes. He prepared the ground for science by

establishing the laws of causality and both inductive and deductive reasoning [2] [1]. Despite a belief in determinism, he allowed for free will and the moulding of personality through choice of environment [2]. In this, Aristotle's position finds a direct echo in B. F. Skinner's Behaviour Modification theory. His classification system, concern over similarities and differences, categories of oppositions and contradictions, his dualistic either/or thinking relates directly to the approach taken by scientific psychology. Finally, Aristotle's (ca. 330 BC) reasoned, although unreasonable argument on the meaninglessness of dreams and inner experiences parallels the contemporary attitude of Skinner and other positivistic thinkers [16].

Scientific Psychology's Debt to Plato

Here it is noteworthy that scientific psychology is beginning to acknowledge the reality of the inner world and its healing properties. Science will eventually have to accept that there is more to dreaming, fantasy and inner experience than they have been willing to admit thus far. Studies in rapid eye movement [R.E.M.], creativity, biofeedback and right and left brain-functioning are showing results that are breaking through the defensive wall of positivism. Scientific Psychology, too, will one day be forced to recognise its debt to Plato.

Jung and the Reconciliation of Western Thought

It is no exaggeration to argue that Western thought finds its reconciliation in the depth-psychology of C. G. Jung. In the opening lines of *Timaeus*, Plato writes. “one, two, three, but where, my dear Timaeus, is the fourth of those guests of yesterday--?” [12]. A generation inspired by Jung can take that as symbolic of the fatal weakness of Platonic philosophy. Jung often refers to the legendary alchemical axiom of Maria, which states that “One becomes Two, Two becomes Three and out of the Third comes One as the Fourth” and the need to integrate the four, or the chthonic spirit, into consciousness for wholeness [14]. Although the archetypes for Jung are similar to Plato’s ideas, they are also fully involved in the biological processes and the body [4]. They are psychoid, embracing and transcending both spirit and matter [7]. Given this understanding there is, according to Jung, potential for psycho-spiritual transformation and not simply personality moulding through education and laws. In this regard, it is relevant to note that Jung’s theory of dreams is far more comprehensive and effective than that of Plato.

Jung’s fourfold personality typology with extroverted and introverted attitudes is likewise more complete and grounded than Plato’s threefold system. The deficiency in the latter’s typology is readily evident when compared to the more differentiated *chakra varuna* or fourfold order of society in ancient India, with its priestly class of knowledge, leadership class, trading class and servant class [15]. In Plato’s system the last two

classes particularly are poorly defined or not understood to represent authentic ethical and spiritual types. Indeed in relation to fourfold models of personality his threefold model is certainly a reflection of the fact that one aspect, "the fourth guest," is missing.

Although Aristotle and Plato complement each other, placing reality on the opposite ends of the spectrum, both sought fulfilment through intellectual reason [2] [5]. In the process they each established a dualistic split between spirit and the body. In the case of Plato, an introverted intuitive thinker, the body was regarded as evil and an obstacle to contemplation of the Good and access to knowledge [5], whereas for Aristotle, an introverted thinking sensation type, only the rational soul of the positivistic intellect was considered to be immortal [1]. During that period in history, the experience of numinosity came through the mind. Both regarded the body as inferior, setting the course for an ever widening separation between spirit and matter as well as ideals and instincts in the Western soul.

Today, we live in a different time. The numinous resides in the body and the inferior function, which more often than not is feeling or sensation. There is now the growing realisation of the need to integrate the body and bodily sensations along with the spirit into consciousness, an idea initiated by Jung. Properly understood, this means that a conscious return to the mythological and the magico-religious and archaic modes of consciousness is necessary. There, we find Plato's missing "fourth guest of yesterday."

Western thought is redeemed through Jung's genius. Psychology becomes philosophy and the love of wisdom, now including the humble neglected fourth, Plato's missing friend, the body and the physical world.

There is a direct link between the thought of the two principal fathers of Western philosophy, Plato [Socrates] and Aristotle. Although scientific psychology can more readily be seen as the offspring of Aristotle, Depth-Psychology, too, even Jungian Depth-Psychology, is a rightful heir to the philosopher's thought. This is evident in the scientific approach taken by Jung and his disciples to study the inner life and the objective psyche. It is also evident in Aristotle's influence on alchemy and alchemists whom, one could legitimately argue, are Jung's true ancestors. But there is a more obvious link to Depth-Psychology through Plato and his philosophy, especially evident in the similarity between Jung's archetypes and Plato's ideas. There is, however, a significant difference. Platonic ideas are only substantial in the realm of thought while, for Jung, archetypes have both a spiritual and physical dimension as well as a beyond. Ultimately both Plato and Aristotle make a split between spirit and matter, giving primacy of value to contemplation and the mind, while devaluing the body. Jung's genius is that he formulated a psychology that not only reconciles Western thought but that comes along with the redemption of matter and the physical world.

REFERENCES

- [1] Brennan, James F. (1986). History and systems of psychology. (Second edition) Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall division of Simon and Schuster, Inc., 16-24.
- [2] Durant, Will (1961). The story of philosophy. Washington Square Press. New York: Pocket Books division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1-21, 49-53, 58-60, 72, 78-79, 74-78, 40-42.
- [3] Gebser, Jean (1989). The ever present origin (Noel Barstad and Algis Mickienas, Trans.). Athens: Ohio University Press, 76, 85, 256, 302. (Original work published 1949 and 1953).
- [4] Stevens, Anthony (1990). On Jung. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 39-40, 59-63.
- [5] Melling, David H. (1987). Understanding Plato. An Opus Book. New York: Oxford University Press, 55, 97-110, 74-85, 138-140, 1-14, 104-107, 58-61, 66-74.
- [6] Hillman, James (1975). Re-visioning psychology. New York: Harper & Row Publishers. Inc., 159-160, Ill. A
- [7] Jacobi, Jolande, Hull, R. F. C., editors (1974). C. G. Jung: Psychological reflections: A new anthology of his writings (1905-1961). Bollingen Series XXI. Princeton N.H.: Princeton University Press, 3-37, 36-52.
- [8] Sharp, Daryl (1987). Personality types: Jung's model of typology Toronto: Inner City Books, 11-34.
- [9] Ellis, Albert, Ph.D. Harper, Robert A. A new guide rational living. Forward by Melvin Powers. (1986). Hollywood: Wilshire Books Company, 1-37.
- [10] Johnson, Robert (1986). Innerwork: Using dreams and active imagination for personal growth. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 179-203.
- [11] Taylor, F. Sherwood (not specified). The alchemists: Founders of modern chemistry. London: The Scientific Book Club.
- [12] Dunne, Carrin (1989). Behold woman: A Jungian approach to feminist theology. Willmette, Illinois: Chiron Publications. 74-88.

[13]Samuels, Andrew (1985). Readings in psychology: Jung and the post-Jungian. 11-16. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 91.

[14]Jung C.G.(1967) *The Collected Works Vol. 13 (Trans. by RFC Hull) Alchemical Studies Princeton, N J : Princeton University Press.,151.*

[15] Aurobindo, Sri. *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library. Volume 21. The synthesis of yoga. 712-723. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram. 1971.*

[16] Aristotle (CA 330 B. C.). *The works of Aristotle translated into English. Volume 3. On dreams London: Oxford University Press.*