



YOUR KINDLE NOTES FOR:

The Cave and the Light: Plato Versus Aristotle, and the Struggle for the Soul of Western Civilization

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25 Highlight(s) | 0 Note(s)

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So instead of Plato's philosophy of transcendence, in which everything is a reflection or a sign of something higher and more real, Aristotle gives us a philosophy of causation. Everything that is, has been caused to be or made to happen; and when we discover the cause or causes of a thing, we learn what it is supposed to do and be. We "possess unqualified scientific knowledge of a thing," Aristotle declares in his Posterior Analytics, "when we think that we know the cause on which the fact depends, as the cause of that fact and of no other."16 Causes for Aristotle come in clusters of four.

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Aristotle's term for this God is the Unmoved Mover or Prime Mover, since He presides over everything that changes or moves in the universe, without changing or moving Himself. He alone has already achieved His actuality, or *energeia*, simply by being. He thinks, and everything moves. Aristotle's God borrows many of the characteristics of Plato's God.

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Here we arrive at one of the most crucial differences between Plato and Aristotle, and one of the most important for the future shape of Western culture. Plato's philosophy looks constantly backward, to what we were, or what we've lost, or to an original of which we are the pale imitation or copy. In that past original, Plato will say, we find the key that unlocks our future. Later that most Platonist of epochs, the Renaissance, would look back to classical antiquity for its model of perfection, just as the Romantics—Platonists almost to a man and

woman—would look back to the Middle Ages. Aristotle, by contrast, looks steadily forward, to what we can be rather than what we were. His outlook is by its nature optimistic: “The universe and everything in it is developing towards something continually better than what came before,” including ourselves. It is truly a “philosophy of aspiration,” as scholar F. M. Cornford once dubbed it, and for Aristotle the world we make for ourselves continually reflects that constant striving toward improvement. In that sense, Aristotle is the first great advocate of progress—and Plato, creator of the vanished utopia Atlantis, the first great theorist of the idea of decline.²¹ This

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Aristotle believed that the goal of political institutions was man’s improvement rather than his perfection. He believed the way to do this was by encouraging each individual to realize his potential, rather than force him to submit to a collective order. By contrast, the most famous Platonic dialogue, the Republic, is all about raising that collective order to the highest-pitched perfection. Plato explicitly made the individual’s health and happiness dependent on the larger political community.¹ Whereas Aristotle looked to Athens as his basic political model, Plato preferred Sparta, Athens’s great rival.

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In this way, an ideal society and even an ideal people will result—especially since Plato’s plan includes a rudimentary form of eugenics, with the Rulers making sure the best breed with the best.¹³ At this point, Socrates’s listeners get

Note:

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Alexander and Aristotle were together for four years. When they parted company, it was as if they had never met. “Men who are utterly superior” to others, Aristotle says at one point in the Politics, are “a law unto themselves.”³³ Perhaps the one thing Alexander got out of his lessons with Aristotle was the sense of natural Greek superiority to other barbarian races, and that if Greeks ever truly unified, they could crush anyone, even the Persian Empire. Alexander, of course, proceeded to do just that. But this was a chauvinist view he could have learned

from almost any Greek writer in the mid-fourth century BCE, even Plato. As

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It is an instructive story. Since World War II, political theorists have been all too aware of the dangers of Plato's approach to politics, of reaching too high and too fast to make our utopian hopes a reality.‡ The Philosopher Ruler can turn out to be Cambodia's Pol Pot or the Ayatollah Khomeini.

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Aristotle's philosophy emphasizes the necessity of change, even progress. Yet paradoxically, his insistence on being the detached observer, on analyzing rather than influencing events, winds up providing the excuse for institutional inertia and apathy. This is what happened when his influence grew too strong in the universities of medieval Europe and when scholars turned to Aristotle to justify appalling episodes like the slave trade and the conquest of the New World.§

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We can also translate thymos as righteous anger, the burning indignation we feel at the sight of a parent abusing a helpless child, or any wrongdoing and injustice. Thymos is the fire that burns in the heart of the activist, the reformer, the revolutionary, and the intellectual rebel. All the truly great reformers had it: Mohandas Gandhi, Emmeline Pankhurst, William Wilberforce, Bishop Desmond Tutu. It's what distinguishes a Martin Luther from an Erasmus; a Rousseau from a Voltaire; a Martin Luther King from a Booker T. Washington; and a Lenin from a Kerensky. It's a quality that can land us all in trouble; but sometimes it also springs us out of servitude. More than once in history, Aristotle's writings will offer a pretext around which brutal practices like slavery and imperialism, and narrow-minded and rigid orthodoxies, will be justified or built. And more than once in history, it will take a renegade Platonist to knock them down.

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All the same, Abelard opened the mind of the Middle Ages in new and startling ways. He gave the name of Aristotle and Aristotle's logic an edgy glamour it never entirely lost. Aristotle had said: All men desire to know. Abelard now added: All men need to question and doubt in order to know. These were important signposts for the future. For now, medieval civilization was about to swing down another path, one emblazoned by the Neoplatonist imagination.

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They might just as well have called it the Age of Locke. No thinker since Socrates dominated the minds of his immediate successors as John Locke did. His ideas were the flammable fuel of the Enlightenment, and sent it soaring to new intellectual heights. But this was not Locke the political theorist: his *Two Treatises of Government* were less read than used to be thought.¹ The Locke who inspired the eighteenth century was the philosopher who wired Aristotle's most important insight, that all knowledge comes through experience, into the modern Western mind.

Note:

Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, written in 1690 after the Glorious Revolution, decisively moved the Enlightenment in Aristotle's direction.* This was Aristotle the father of empirical science, the advocate of rational argument reinforced by the evidence of the senses. It was Aristotle shorn of substances, essences, categories, and final causes and selectively edited.² Apart from three or four texts—and only certain key passages of those—the rest of his work was left to gather dust.

Note:

Why did the Enlightenment dislike Plato so much? Because his worldview directly contradicted the view of reality and human nature the Enlightenment derived from John Locke, and ultimately from Aristotle.‡ That view was, first, that man is an individual, an individual born with a natural sociability (an updated version of Aristotle's *zoon politikon*) but also a desire to protect his own natural rights and his own

self-interest. "It is love of self," Voltaire would write, "that encourages love of others." That self-interest was derived from nature, "which warns us to respect [the self-interest] of others."⁶ This was one reason the Enlightenment, like Aristotle, so strongly opposed the Republic's formula for communism. The abolition of private property was not only contrary to natural right, it would also ensure that the bonds that connected men to each other would be founded not on mutual respect and friendship, but on envy or even hate. "Nothing can be conceived more destructive of human happiness, more infallibly contrived to transform men and women into Brutes, Yahoos, or Daemons," John Adams wrote, than community of property.⁷

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Second, the key to happiness is understanding how the real world works. This idea stood in contrast to Plato-inspired utopian dreams, including John Calvin's Geneva (a favorite target in the Enlightenment). Our highest ideals are not reflections of some transcendent reality, Enlightenment thinkers argued, or some higher truth. They are just that, ideals: insubstantial playthings of the mind that can deceive as often as they can inspire. This is what led Jefferson to dismiss the "dreams of Plato" and dub Plato's ideal of a Philosopher Ruler "whimsical" and "puerile." Third, the only way to understand that world is through observation and analysis of our experience, not inward self-reflection. In the words of the Scottish thinker Thomas Reid,

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John Locke had been a Protestant Dissenter and a Puritan at heart. His definition of happiness included a heavy dose of man's duties to God. The eighteenth century was less particular. It found it easy to equate happiness with pleasure, although it never forgot that the latter included the pleasures of the mind. And when the Enlightenment wanted pleasure, it knew just where to look for it. That was the city.

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Taken together, these traits formed the virtues of a new urban type: the men and women of a polite and commercial age. The French will describe them as bourgeois; in German, they are bürgerlich; in English,

the middle class. Later, the bourgeoisie will become figures of fun and contempt. They are mocked in *Madame Bovary* (not to mention *Desperate Housewives*) and excoriated in Marx's *Das Kapital*. The Enlightenment, however, saw in middle-class man an up-to-date reflection of Aristotle's political animal: a being designed by nature to work peaceably and constructively with others on the basis of free will—and to make a little money while he did it.

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Rousseau had averred that the man who dares to bring true liberty and equality to a people "must feel that he is capable of changing, so to speak, human nature.... The lawgiver's great soul is the true miracle that must vindicate his mission."⁴⁴ The Rolands' friend Maximilien Robespierre believed he was such a man. For a time he convinced others as well (Jacques-Louis David served as his de facto minister of propaganda). Robespierre's goal was to banish tyranny and injustice not just from France, but from the planet. There was no room for compromise or second thoughts. In his grandiose vision, any resistance to the revolutionary regime sprang not from reasonable doubts about whether men could be made good by legislation alone, but from resistance to the idea of virtue itself. It's worth remembering that Platonism lends itself to conspiracy theories.^{ll} The belief that appearances deceive easily grows into the conviction that they deceive for a reason: that hidden manipulators want to keep us in the cave and want, literally, to keep us in the dark. Rousseau himself suffered from a lifelong fear that enemies were constantly working to undercut his success—the same people who were working to keep the world corrupt and unjust. Robespierre believed the same thing. When the National Assembly abolished the monarchy in 1792 and the rest of Europe turned to put Louis XVI back on his throne, Robespierre's utopian hopes became fused with Rousseau's paranoid style. The result would be the Reign of Terror. "Citizens, the nation is in danger," Robespierre

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By 1793 most of the Revolution's real opponents, the royalists, had long since fled abroad. So had most of its moderate voices, like the Marquis de Lafayette. All that were left to punish were those insufficiently committed to the new order and to obeying the General Will. Thousands would pay with their lives for that "indifference."

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As the guillotine claimed its victims, increasingly whatever was not forbidden was made compulsory. Wage and price controls were imposed; universal conscription sent tens of thousands of unwilling Frenchmen into the army to fight the monarchies of Europe. Churches were closed and Christianity banned, along with the traditional calendar, saints' days, and seven-day week. Saint-Just spoke of taking children away from their parents at age five and training them, like ancient Spartans, to become workers or soldiers. For the first time in European history, the word communisme floated in the air.⁴⁷

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What Darwin had discovered was a way of seeing nature as an endless chain of mutability of species, reaching back through time to the very origins of life. On one side, Darwin's theory was a leap into an unknown future; on the other, it was also a sharp glance backward. It revealed that Aristotle's notion of a "scale of nature," a continuous ladder made up of living things leading from the lowest to the highest order, was not so wrong after all—nor was Darwin's grandfather's picture of propagation as a process of self-renewing improvement and perfection.³⁶

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The problem with Aristotle, whom Darwin described as "one of the greatest, if not the greatest, observers who ever lived," was that he had assumed that the species that made up this scale of nature, from the lowest plants to man himself, were fixed because the changes within species come so imperceptibly slowly, just like the geology of the earth.³⁷ In fact, as fossils showed, species change all the time in the sense that some die off while others carry on. Even among those that carry on, individuals vary—a variation they are poised to pass to their offspring.

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Elsewhere, artists and writers willing to toe “the party line” would find a similar ally in Stalin’s Communist Party. They included Pablo Picasso, Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Tristan Tzara, Louis Aragon, George Grosz, Pablo Neruda, Ernest Hemingway, Bertolt Brecht, Ben Shahn, Langston Hughes, Aimé Césaire, Malcolm Cowley, J. D. Bernal, Stephen Spender, and Jessica Mitford. On the fascist side, the list is shorter but equally dismal: Emil Nolde, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Carl Schmitt, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, Hendrik de Man and his nephew, later founder of Deconstructionism Paul de Man, William Butler Yeats, Thierry Maulnier, Lázló Moholy-Nagy, Philip Johnson, and Günter Grass rounded out the list. The traditional idea, so dear to the Romantics and dating back to Plato’s portrayal of Socrates, that intellectuals are the natural foes of tyranny proved fatally flawed.

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For Rand, the final product of this burst of Aristotelian enlightenment was the modern free market entrepreneur. He is the field marshal of the army of freedom, Rand insisted in 1960, and his “lieutenant commander-in-chief is the scientist.” The businessman turns science’s discoveries “into material products that fill men’s physical needs and expand the comforts of man’s existence.” The free market becomes a mass market, where millions of people of every income level are able to get the products they want cheaper, faster, and more efficiently.

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Aristotle, in turn, became spokesman for the West’s utilitarian scientific side. Reason exists in order to unlock the secrets of nature, not to dismiss them as irrelevant or a distraction. For Aristotle, the life of reason is a constantly unfolding process of inquiry and analysis that serves to reinforce our place as part of a larger natural order. There are no final answers, only more questions and explorations. This makes Aristotle the progenitor not only of sending rockets to the moon but of democratic individualism and free markets. History shows that too much Plato brings a rigid dogmatism and an elitist arrogance—which, as Karl Popper pointed out and as the world saw in the age of Hitler and Stalin and Mao, easily slides into totalitarianism.‡ The twentieth-century successors to Aristotle, the voices of enlightened liberal Europe, forgot how to defend themselves and allowed the totalitarians, with their passionate intensity and contempt for debate, to goose-step into

power. The catastrophes of the twentieth century arose not because men argued too much but because they gave up arguing at all.

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Such are the perils of too much Plato. Too much Aristotle, on the other hand, ends in the narrow-minded sterility that dominated the scholasticism of the Middle Ages, in which everything is reduced to rote formulae and habit and individual creativity is stamped out. A complacent behaviorist calculus begins to govern social and political relationships; fellow human beings become abstract unknowable ciphers to be manipulated at will.

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