

Philosophy 100A: Ancient Greek Philosophy  
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## Sketching or Painting: A comparison of Theories of Substances between Plato and Aristotle

The Vatican Museum houses wide collections of impressive paintings, amongst which is *The School of Athens* (Fig 1). In the centre of this painting is Plato and Aristotle, Raphael depicts Plato's hand pointing to the heaven, alluding his theory of Form; whilst Aristotle holding his hand flat to the ground. It is usually seen as a demonstration of a metaphysical contrast between Plato and Aristotle. When explaining substances, Plato turns away from our actual physical world and looks for an ideal realm for perfect forms, meanwhile, Aristotle is interested in the actual objects. In this essay, I shall analyse Plato's arguments and some problems with Plato's theory of Forms, and address how Aristotle overcome them with his theory of Substance in *Categories* and *Metaphysics*, with extension to Locke's idea and what substance will be in this digital era.

### Allegory of the Cave

In Book VII of Plato's *Republic*, Plato tells a story about prisoners living in a cave. In such a cave, "they are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds,"<sup>1</sup> so they can neither move nor turn around their heads. All they see comes from the shadows of things thrown up on the wall by the blazing fire behind them. Since they are raised in this cave, they think the shadows are real with great details. They never realise those shadows are but merely phantoms of the outside world until

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<sup>1</sup>"The Republic ." The Internet Classics Archive | The Republic by Plato, [classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html).

someday one person finds a way out of the cave. It was overwhelming because for the first time in his life he was dazzled by the brilliant sunshine in which everything is properly illuminated. Gradually his eyes adjust to the sunshine and begin to recognise the true forms of objects, whose only as shadows he knows of formerly. “what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being”<sup>2</sup> I shall not get into the later details of the story. From this short excerpt, we can have a grasp of Plato’s ideal of Form, which he thinks is the truer being than what we see in our physical world.

The story is just an analogy to Plato’s theory of forms. Plato’s theory of forms absorbed Parmenides’ theory, which stated: “Real being does not change.” We are no less than those prisoners in the den, according to Plato. What we perceive and what we aim for in this world are merely shadows. Actually, many shreds of evidence support his skeptic accusations. Our world is not reliably constant, for it is changing over time. Nothing remains permanent. Flowers wither, fruits fade, buildings crumble, people grow old, limbs fail, sense rot and the pulse of joy that beats in us at twenty becomes sluggish<sup>3</sup>. Even what we perceive at present deceiving, what we think is the water on the desert horizon is in fact a mirage. Plato then, believes, beyond our changing and therefore unreliable, there is a world of Forms(eide).

Plato believes there is an “intelligible realm”, in which all perfect forms of things such as perfect justice, perfect horse, perfect triangle and even a perfect hangover exist. They are all constant and will not change. All the things we have in this world are just imperfect approximations of that ideal object that only rests in the world of Forms, examples of putatively independently-existing abstract perfect ideas. How can we know the perfect form of things? Plato argues it requires a lot of study

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Wilde, Oscar. *The picture of Dorian Gray*. Penguin Books, 2010.

and investigation to figure out what those forms look like. That, according to him, is the primary job of philosophers. Plato would hardly agree with empiricists; he thinks all knowledge existed in us even before we were born. We just need to “recollect” it in order to develop into different types of persons. For instance, a teacher must have a better recollection of how to teach to make him/her a better teacher. That is why I compare Plato’s theory of forms as “sketching”. Because the way we construct our physical world is to “copy” the forms from that “intelligible realm”, it is also up to our skills to reach however close the objects we build to that everlasting form.

### Uniqueness and Separateness

Socrates of the Republic suggests that we recognise the form by applying the same term for each multiplicity of objects. Therefore, similar things have a shared relation to a single unique form that accounts for their being similar in some respect. For instance, if there exist two forms of cups, rather than one, there must be something virtually they both share. This shared property, is the “cup-ness” and it is unique. This implies the uniqueness of each form. [Plato] also believes Forms are Separate from sensibles—that is, he seems to believe that the form of *F* can exist whether or not there are any *F* sensible particulars.<sup>4</sup>

### Objections of Plato's account on Forms

Despite its difficulty and abstractness to grasp such concept, it faces many objections as well. Plato himself offered a criticism of his theory of Forms in the dialogue of Parmenides. It is famously called “The Third Man” argument.

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<sup>4</sup> “Is Plato Vulnerable to the Third Man Argument?” Oxford Scholarship, 7 Nov. 2014, [www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/0198235496.001.0001/acprof-9780198235491-chapter-16](http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/0198235496.001.0001/acprof-9780198235491-chapter-16).

Previously we have examined that different shapes of things belong to one perfect form due to their common shared property. Since the form is ultimately unique in another realm, the form of a “pencil” must also be a “pencil” itself. The form of “pencil” must also have the property of pencil-ness in order to be that perfect form, from which all the pencils in this physical world derive. If this is true, there must be another Form to explain this, a form that this previously “perfect” form animate. Because the purpose of forms is to explain why things have different properties and yet belong to one form. Alongside with this second form to predicate the first form, there is a third form, a fourth one and so on. There is always another “form” behind the previous one, just like when we do taxes. (Welcome to the tax season).

### Aristotle’s Approach to These Objections

Platonic forms would be perfect, but it has to “pay a high price<sup>5</sup>” because it is not empirically accessible to us. Aristotle, then took a very different approach. In his Book 7 of *Metaphysics*. Very quickly at the beginning of Book 7, Aristotle rejects the Form’s path to be a candidate for a substance from his teacher, Plato.

Contrasting to what Plato’s ideal realm idea, Aristotle took a more practical and empirical approach. Aristotle turns the question on the substance to the enquiry of “coming to be”. In Aristotle’s, *Categories*, the classic book for predicates, he listed the substance as the first predicate an object can have. Before objects can be described with different predicates, it must firstly “be something”. If I want to describe a “blue cup”, this thing must be a cup first before I can say “it is blue”. Furthermore, Aristotle introduced the concept of primary substance and secondary substance. Primary substance is the thing in itself, which is essence without qualifications.

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<sup>5</sup> Makin, Stephen (2009). *Aristotle : form, matter, and substance*. In Robin Le Poidevin (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Metaphysics*. Routledge.

Secondary substance is the name we attach to this thing. Put simply, the things just exist as the primary substances, we then assign names to them, so that we can refer to them. [The] man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him (Gen. 2.20). Aristotle also considers that one of the most important human activities we engage in to move objects from primary substances into secondary substances, things with a name.

We have here encountered one major difference between Plato's theory of substance and Aristotle's. According to Plato, the reason we call a dog "dog" is because it participates in "dog-ness" which we recognise such approximation from the early memories we acquired before we were even born. There must exist an ideal, perfectly archetypical "dog" for the puppy we are patting right now. However, for Aristotle, the name "dog" came from us, just like the biblical story I quoted previously, not from an unreachable ideal realm.

The introduction of primary and secondary substance has given Aristotelian metaphysics possibilities to overcome some arguments Plato's theory of Forms vulnerable to. Since according to the theory of substances in Aristotle's Categories, things do not come from a perfect form, we do not need another form to make something in our world. What we need is the intellect, the capacity of reason to assign names to things around us. That is why Aristotle's hand was pointing towards the earth in Raphael's depiction.

Besides the origin of substance, "where things come to be", Aristotle's theory of substance also differ from Plato's by regarding particular objects such as a cup, a dog, and a human being are basic because they are the subject of predications. They have the ability to be ascribed to. In other words, Aristotle categorise primary

being as “place holders” for different predicates, such as blue, red, glass or plastic. They will remain the same even undergoing changes. Rather than being the derivatives of “perfect forms” according to Plato, substance is primary for predications. Plato would agree a “blue cup” is caused by the perfect form of “blue cup” in another realm, whilst Aristotle would most likely to disagree by saying without the existence of this particular blue cup, there would not be a perfect cup.

Aristotle did not eventually answer the question what the substance is. It is probable he prefers the answer that all the objects exist in our physical world range from pure form, which is the God, to pure matter. Aristotle then looks at this issue in another way in terms of causations. When we ask about “being”, we are actually asking the question of “belonging”. How do things belong to each other, then we fall into the discussion of four causations. As we search the essence, the substantial form we are searching for the causes.

### Locke's Theory of Substances

Aristotle has been profound in such subject, yet he could not give a perfectly definite answer what substance is. This unsolved enquiry leaves many thinkers rooms to build on.

One I must point out is the pioneer of the empiricists, John Locke. On the subject of substance, Locke believes that we are born with an empty mind which can receive whatever information that we receive and relate them by associations. He rejects the idea of “innate teachings”, which reflects Platonic theory of forms. He argues that we construct our ideas of this physical world through a series of senses and experiences. Like Aristotle, Locke also introduced the concepts of Primary qualities and Secondary qualities, which are quite different from Aristotle's primary

substance and secondary substance. According to Locke, Primary qualities are those predicates of such an object that is independent of any observer, such as height or weight. Secondary qualities are thought to be those which might produce different sensations in different observers such as colours and sound. For instance, the “blue cup” I have raised previously, Locke would much lean towards Aristotle, rather more extreme. Locke would consider that it is because we arrogate the knowledge of “cup” and of blueness since infancy, therefore we call in a “blue cup”. However, my “blueness” differ from yours because we have brought with different experiences of “blueness” as the secondary qualities for such “blue cup”.

So really Locke considers that any object possesses both primary and secondary qualities. For primary qualities, Locke leans more towards Aristotle, because the primary qualities are “what-it-is” amongst observers. For secondary qualities, Locke leans more towards Plato, because the perceptions of things differ from person to person. They are not permanent. What you taste sweet might be sour to another person, but both of these sensations are valid.

Why do we differ from others? Again, Locke gives back this question to us. It is because we have a disagreement about the outside world. We all have different perceptions according to faculties.

### Substance in Digital Era

It was rather simply for philosophers to stare at a stone and ask why it is a stone. Now it is even harder with all kinds of technological inventions, namely the augmented reality. With virtual reality, we can just wear a pair of glasses, see through the world and interact with all kinds of objects and people, even when we are sitting in our rooms. All those things, are they real? They are in terms of sensory

but not in the reality. I believe this is a challenge and also an opportunity to rethink how real what we “perceive” and we “interact with”.

### Conclusion

So in this essay, I have examined the concepts of substances from the Platonic theory of Forms to Aristotle's Categories, extended to Locke's theory and touched on what substance is with the appearances of augmented reality. It is obvious that what substance is can also evolve with the advances of human understandings.

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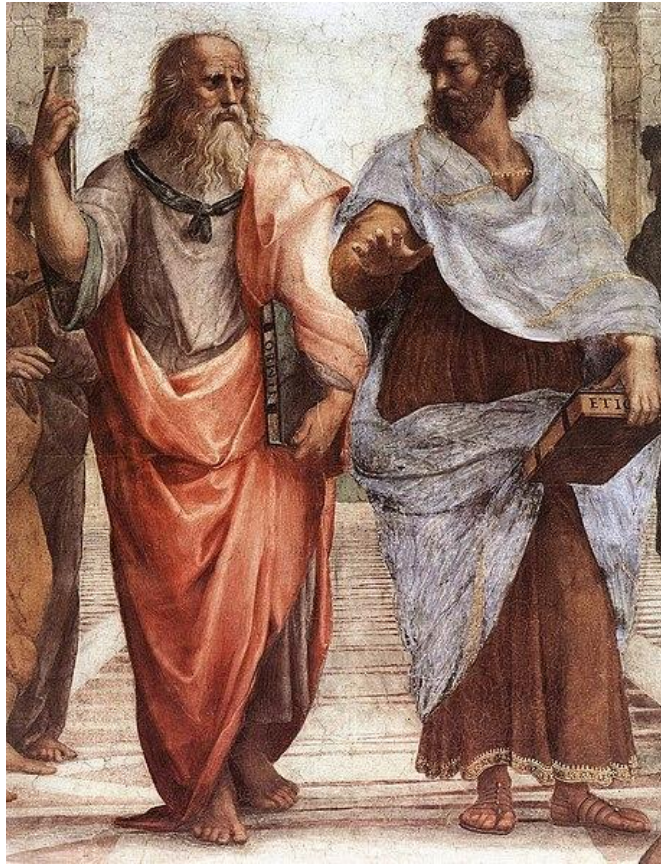


Fig 1 *The School of Athens*