ARISTOTLE’S CRITICISMS OF PLATO’S FORMS

ARISTOTLE’S INTRODUCTION TO HIS CRITICISMS IN THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS:

We had perhaps better consider the universal good and discuss thoroughly what is meant by it, although such an inquiry is made an uphill one by the fact that the Forms have been introduced by friends of our own. Yet it would perhaps be thought to be better, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, especially as we are philosophers; for, while both are dear, piety requires us to honour truth above our friends (Nicomachean Ethics I.6 1096a11-1096a16).

CRITICISM I: THERE IS NOT ONE ALL-INCLUSIVE GOOD [I];
CRITICISM II: GOOD IS SAID IN AS MANY WAYS AS BEING IS [II];
CRITICISM III: THERE IS NOT ONE GOOD OF ALL SCIENCES [III];
CRITICISM IV: THE ‘THING ITSELF’ OBJECTION [IV]
CRITICISM V: THE ‘ETERNAL GOOD’ OBJECTION [V]

[I] The men who introduced this doctrine did not posit Ideas of classes within which they recognized priority and posteriority (which is the reason why they did not maintain the existence of an Idea embracing all numbers); but things are called good both in the category of substance and in that of quality and in that of relation, and that which is per se, i.e. substance, is prior in nature to the relative (for the latter is like an offshoot and accident of what is); so that there could not be a common Idea set over all these goods. [II] Further, since things are said to be good in as many ways as they are said to be (for things are called good both in the category of substance, as God and reason, and in quality, e.g. the virtues, and in quantity, e.g. that which is moderate, and in relation, e.g. the useful, and in time, e.g. the right opportunity, and in place, e.g. the right locality and the like), clearly the good cannot be something universally present in all cases and single; for then it would not have been predicated in all the categories but in one only. [III] Further, since of the things answering to one Idea there is one science, there would have been one science of all the goods; but as it is there are many sciences even of the things that fall under one category, e.g. of opportunity (for opportunity in war is studied by strategy and in disease by medicine), and the moderate in food is studied by medicine and in exercise by the science of gymnastics. [IV] And one might ask the question, what in the world they mean by 'a thing itself', if in man himself and in a particular man the account of man is one and the same. For in so far as they are men, they will in no respect differ; and if this is so, neither will there be a difference in so far as they are good. [V] But again it will not be good any the more for being eternal, since that which lasts long is no whiter than that which perishes in a day. The Pythagoreans seem to give a more plausible account of the good, when they place the one in the column of goods; and it is they that Speusippus seems to have followed (Nicomachean Ethics I.6 1096a17-1096b7).

CRITICISM VI: THE GOODS-IN-THEMSELVES OBJECTION [VI]:

[VI] But let us discuss these matters elsewhere; an objection to what we have said, however, may be discerned in the fact that the Platonists have not been speaking about all goods, and that
the goods that are pursued and loved for themselves are called good by reference to a single Form, while those which tend to produce or to preserve these somehow or to prevent their contraries are called so by reference to these, and in a different sense. Clearly, then, goods must be spoken of in two ways, and some must be good in themselves, the others by reason of these. Let us separate, then, things good in themselves from things useful, and consider whether the former are called good by reference to a single Idea. What sort of goods would one call good in themselves? Is it those that are pursued even when isolated from others, such as intelligence, sight, and certain pleasures and honours? Certainly, if we pursue these also for the sake of something else, yet one would place them among things good in themselves. Or is nothing other than the Idea good in itself? In that case the Form will be empty. But if the things we have named are also things good in themselves, the account of the good will have to appear as something identical in them all, as that of whiteness is identical in snow and in white lead. But of honour, wisdom, and pleasure, just in respect of their goodness, the accounts are distinct and diverse. The good, therefore, is not something common answering to one Idea (Nicomachean Ethics I.6 1096b8-1096b26).

CRITICISM VII: THE HOW ARE GOODS ONE OBJECTION [VII]:

CRITICISM VIII: THE NEITHER PRACTICABLE NOR POSSESSABLE GOOD OBJECTION [VIII]:

[VII] But then in what way are things called good? They do not seem to be like the things that only chance to have the same name. Are goods one, then, by being derived from one good or by all contributing to one good, or are they rather one by analogy? Certainly as sight is in the body, so is reason in the soul, and so on in other cases. But perhaps these subjects had better be dismissed for the present; for perfect precision about them would be more appropriate to another branch of philosophy. [VIII] And similarly with regard to the Idea; even if there is some one good which is universally predicable of goods or is capable of separate and independent existence, clearly it could not be achieved or attained by man; but we are now seeking something attainable. Perhaps, however, some one might think it worth while to have knowledge of it with a view to the goods that are attainable and achievable; for having this as a sort of pattern we shall know better the goods that are good for us, and if we know them shall attain them. This argument has some plausibility, but seems to clash with the procedure of the sciences; for all of these, though they aim at some good and seek to supply the deficiency of it, leave on one side the knowledge of the good. Yet that all the exponents of the arts should be ignorant of, and should not even seek, so great an aid is not probable. It is hard, too, to see how a weaver or a carpenter will be benefited in regard to his own craft by knowing this 'good itself', or how the man who has viewed the Idea itself will be a better doctor or general thereby. For a doctor seems not even to study health in this way, but the health of man, or perhaps rather the health of a particular man; for it is individuals that he is healing. But enough of these topics (Nicomachean Ethics I.6 1096b27-1097a14).

ARISTOTLE’S CRITICISMS FROM HIS METAPHYSICS (not numbered):

Let us leave the Pythagoreans for the present; for it is enough to have touched on them as much as we have done. But as for those who posit the Ideas as causes, firstly, in seeking to grasp the causes of the things around us, they introduced others equal in number to these, as if a man
who wanted to count things thought he could not do it while they were few, but tried to count them when he had added to their number. For the Forms are practically equal to or not fewer than the things, in trying to explain which these thinkers proceeded from them to the Forms. For to each set of substances there answers a Form which has the same name and exists apart from the substances, and so also in the case of all other groups in which there is one character common to many things, whether the things are in this changeable world or are eternal.

Further, of the ways in which we prove that the Forms exist, none is convincing; for from some no inference necessarily follows, and from some it follows that there are Forms of things of which we think there are no Forms.

For according to the arguments from the existence of the sciences there will be Forms of all things of which there are sciences, and according to the argument that there is one attribute common to many things there will be Forms even of negations, and according to the argument that there is an object for thought even when the thing has perished, there will be Forms of perishable things; for we can have an image of these.

Further, of the more accurate arguments, some lead to Ideas of relations, of which we say there is no independent class, and others involve the difficulty of the 'third man'.

And in general the arguments for the Forms destroy the things for whose existence we are more anxious than for the existence of the Ideas; for it follows that not the dyad but number is first, i.e. that the relative is prior to the absolute--besides all the other points on which certain people by following out the opinions held about the Ideas have come into conflict with the principles of the theory.

Further, according to the assumption on which our belief in the Ideas rests, there will be Forms not only of substances but also of many other things (for the concept is single not only in the case of substances but also in the other cases, and there are sciences not only of substance but also of other things, and a thousand other such conclusions also follow). But according to the necessities of the case and the opinions held about the Forms, if they can be shared there must be Ideas of substances only. For they are not shared incidentally, but a thing must share in its Form as in something not predicated of a subject (e.g. if a thing shares in double itself, it shares also in eternal, but incidentally; for eternal happens to be predicable of the double). Therefore the Forms will be substance; and the same terms indicate substance in this and in the ideal world (or what will be the meaning of saying that there is something apart from the particulars--the one over many?). And if the Ideas and the particulars that share them have the same Form, there will be something common to these; for why should 2 be one and the same in the perishable 2's or in those which are many but eternal, and not the same in the 2 itself as in the particular 2? But if they have not the same Form, they must have only the name in common, and it is as if one were to call both Callias and a wooden image a man, without observing any community between them.

Above all one might discuss the question what on earth the Forms contribute to sensible things, either to those that are eternal or to those that come into being and cease to be. For they cause neither movement nor any change in them. But again they help in no way towards the knowledge of the other things (for they are not even the substance of these, else they would have been in them), nor towards their being, if they are not in the particulars which share in them; though if they were, they might be thought to be causes, as white causes whiteness in that with which it is mixed. But this argument, which first Anaxagoras and later Eudoxus and certain others used, is too easily upset; for it is not difficult to collect many insuperable objections to such a view.
But further all other things cannot come from the Forms in any of the usual senses of 'from'. And to say that they are patterns and the other things share them is to use empty words and poetical metaphors. For what is it that works, looking to the Ideas? Anything can either be, or become, like another without being copied from it, so that whether Socrates exists or not a man might come to be like Socrates; and evidently this might be so even if Socrates were eternal. And there will be several patterns of the same thing, and therefore several Forms, e.g. animal and two-footed and also man himself will be Forms of man. Again, the Forms are patterns not only of sensible things, but of themselves too, e.g. the Form of genus will be a genus of Forms; therefore the same thing will be pattern and copy.

Again it must be held to be impossible that the substance and that of which it is the substance should exist apart; how, therefore, can the Ideas, being the substances of things, exist apart?

In the Phaedo the case is stated in this way--that the Forms are causes both of being and of becoming; yet when the Forms exist, still the things that share in them do not come into being, unless there is some efficient cause; and many other things come into being (e.g. a house or a ring), of which we say there are no Forms. Clearly, therefore, even the other things can both be and come into being owing to such causes as produce the things just mentioned.

Again, if the forms are numbers, how can they be causes? Is it because existing things are other numbers, e.g. one number is man, another is Socrates, another Callias? Why then are the one set of numbers causes of the other set? It will not make any difference even if the former are eternal and the latter are not. But if it is because things in this sensible world (e.g. harmony) are ratios of numbers, evidently there is some one class of things of which they are ratios. If, then, this--the matter--is some definite thing, evidently the numbers themselves too will be ratios of something to something else. E.g. if Callias is a numerical ratio between fire and earth and water and air, his Idea also will be a number of certain other underlying things; and the Idea of man, whether it is a number in a sense or not, will still be a numerical ratio of certain things and not a number proper, nor will it be a number merely because it is a numerical ratio.

Again, from many numbers one number is produced, but how can one Form come from many Forms? And if the number comes not from the many numbers themselves but from the units in them, e.g. in 10,000, how is it with the units? If they are specifically alike, numerous absurdities will follow, and also if they are not alike (neither the units in the same number being like one another nor those in different numbers being all like to all); for in what will they differ, as they are without quality? This is not a plausible view, nor can it be consistently thought out. Further, they must set up a second kind of number (with which arithmetic deals), and all the objects which are called intermediate by some thinkers; and how do these exist or from what principles do they proceed? Or why must they be intermediate between the things in this sensible world and the things-in-themselves? Further, the units in 2 must each come from a prior 2; but this is impossible. Further, why is a number, when taken all together, one? Again, besides what has been said, if the units are diverse they should have spoken like those who say there are four, or two, elements; for each of these thinkers gives the name of element not to that which is common, e.g. to body, but to fire and earth, whether there is something common to them, viz. body, or not. But in fact they speak as if the One were homogeneous like fire or water; and if this is so, the numbers will not be substances. Evidently, if there is a One-in-itself and this is a first principle, 'one' is being used in more than one sense; for otherwise the theory is impossible.

When we wish to refer substances to their principles, we state that lines come from the short and long (i.e. from a kind of small and great), and the plane from the broad and narrow, and
the solid from the deep and shallow. Yet how then can the plane contain a line, or the solid a line or a plane? For the broad and narrow is a different class of things from the deep and shallow. Therefore, just as number is not present in these, because the many and few are different from these, evidently no other of the higher classes will be present in the lower. But again the broad is not a genus which includes the deep, for then the solid would have been a species of plane. Further, from what principle will the presence of the points in the line be derived? Plato even used to object to this class of things as being a geometrical fiction. He called the indivisible lines the principle of lines--and he used to lay this down often. Yet these must have a limit; therefore the argument from which the existence of the line follows proves also the existence of the point.

In general, though philosophy seeks the cause of perceptible things, we have given this up (for we say nothing of the cause from which change takes its start), but while we fancy we are stating the substance of perceptible things, we assert the existence of a second class of substances, while our account of the way in which they are the substances of perceptible things is empty talk; for sharing, as we said before, means nothing. Nor have the Forms any connexion with that which we see to be the cause in the case of the sciences, and for whose sake mind and nature produce all that they do produce,--with this cause we assert to be one of the first principles; but mathematics has come to be the whole of philosophy for modern thinkers, though they say that it should be studied for the sake of other things. Further, one might suppose that the substance which according to them underlies as matter is too mathematical, and is a predicate and differentia of the substance, i.e. of the matter, rather than the matter itself; i.e. the great and the small are like the rare and the dense which the natural philosophers speak of, calling these the primary differentiae of the substratum; for these are a kind of excess and defect. And regarding movement, if the great and the small are to be movement, evidently the Forms will be moved; but if they are not, whence did movement come? If we cannot answer this the whole study of nature has been annihilated.

And what is thought to be easy--to show that all things are one--is not done; for by 'exposition' all things do not come to be one but there comes to be a One-in-itself, if we grant all the assumptions. And not even this follows, if we do not grant that the universal is a class; and this in some cases it cannot be.

Nor can it be explained either how the lines and planes and solids that come after the numbers exist or can exist, or what meaning they have; for these can neither be Forms (for they are not numbers), nor the intermediates (for those are the objects of mathematics), nor the perishable things. This is evidently a distinct fourth class (Metaphysics I.9 990a32-992b17).