

THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS: AN ART-BASED COMPARISON BETWEEN PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

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Abstract: The modern consensus on the differences between Plato and Aristotle, two influential figures in Greek philosophy, is based on Raphael's renowned artwork, *The School of Athens*. In the painting, Plato is depicted holding his *Timaeus* and pointing toward the heavens, while Aristotle is shown holding *Nicomachean Ethics* and pointing toward the Earth. Many scholars have offered symbolic interpretations, suggesting a divergence between the two philosophers regarding forms and idealism versus the empirical world. In simpler terms, Plato focused on logic and argumentation, while Aristotle focused on physics and experimentation. However, this essay speculates that more can be concluded by focusing on the specific books held by the two figures rather than their entire philosophical frameworks. This approach avoids generic comparisons suggesting the absence of love, beauty, and nurture in Aristotle's work and instead concentrates on how *Timaeus*, a Platonic work about law and social order, is juxtaposed with *Nicomachean Ethics*, an Aristotelian guide to ethics and achieving success and happiness. Through this unique lens, the essay contributes to prior discussions comparing the two philosophers and investigates the details behind Raphael's choice to depict these two books together. This essay does not offer a particular analysis of *The School of Athens* but uses this popular piece to provide a novel perspective on curating and solidifying conclusions about Plato and Aristotle. Therefore, any comments made about Raphael's celebrated artwork remain neutral. The essay concludes that the two books held by Aristotle and Plato contain details that oppose each other directly and indirectly. However, the larger picture is Plato's theory of perfect forms versus Aristotle's emphasis on natural science to justify the sources of knowledge or the creation of being.

Keywords: Epistemology; Metaphysics; Reason; Form; Ethics; Causality

1 INTRODUCTION

In the introduction, this essay briefly captures the portrayal of Raphael's painting *The School of Athens*. Created by Italian painter Raphael during the renaissance, the painting illustrated in Pope Julius II's private apartments in Vatican, partaking in the theme of the historical justification of the power of the Roman Catholic Church through neoplatonic philosophy [1]. The painting is set in an imagined, monumental, and architectural space that resembles a vast hall or a basilica, featuring historically prominent philosophical figures, past and present, centered around Plato and Aristotle. The entire work embodies a complex allegory of secular knowledge in a splendid yet organized, interlocking architectural setting, insinuating the historical continuity of Platonic thought [2].

Yet, this essay intends to dive into some of the characters that we can name, beginning with a direct investigation of the master and apprentice: Plato and Aristotle, the former pointing to heaven, holding *Timaeus*, a work of the beautiful formation of the Universe, the latter pointing to Earth, holding *Nicomachean Ethics*, a work that points to and defends the happiness of men. Though the two books seemingly do not correspond in theme and thoughts perfectly with one another: if we see Plato's *Timaeus* as a defend of heaven and ultimate beauty, then it ought to be compared to Aristotle's *On the Heavens*, in which a geocentric model is elaborated upon, better echoing the pointing gesture of the two figures. Also, some scholars may argue that the two books are coincidentally drafted in a simultaneous interval of time, thus the two is constructed to debate a selective topic. Nevertheless, *Timaeus* is written around 360 BCE meanwhile *Nicomachean Ethics* around 350 BCE, with many other bodies of work drafted and written in between the publication of the two [3]. It is also unlikely for this to happen as the painting is completed during the renaissance, and no testimonials from Raphael support such claims. More or less, the chance of Raphael's personal aspiration as a factor of the juxtaposition is more likely, the claims above are merely speculative.

For young scholars, this essay ought to be looked upon as an introductory to Ancient Greek philosophy through the lens of a renaissance artwork, a rather commonly known masterpiece of Raphael that symbolizes the disputes of Plato and his student Aristotle; this content further aims to reveal some nuances in the details of the two main characters that are often overlooked by amateur scholars, providing grounded analysis of philosophical implications and messages presented in the choice of juxtaposition. For means of broad interest and comprehension, this essay will also provide some probable explanations regarding Raphael and the context of the renaissance in shaping and twisting interpretations that could be made of the depiction in the artwork. Overall, this essay intends to seek novelty in the philosophical reinterpretation and concentrated explanation of Platonic and Aristotelian ethics as they are presented in *The School of Athens*.

2 TIMAEUS AND NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

This essay will begin with two independent accounts of *Timaeus* and *Nicomachean Ethics* respectively, and their intimate link with the depictions in Raphael's work. Due to the need for concision, parts of the work peripheral to the discussion will be omitted. Later in this section, a comparison will be made, followed by a discussion of actual compatibility of the two works, and the larger picture of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy.

2.1 Timaeus and Plato

Timaeus features a monumental dialogue between dramatic personae, including Socrates, Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates [4]. Several themes are discussed explicitly in the work in chronological order. The plot takes place in Critias' home in Athens, while Timaeus, Hermocrates, and Socrates have appeared as guests. Socrates questions the status of a missing guest, historically interpreted as Alcibiades, who is stated to have not shown up due to illness. However, at the request and promise of Timaeus, Socrates restates his gifts to the house: his speeches about the best kind of *polis*. The key ideas that are restated include: 1) everyone is given one occupation that is suited to his or her nature; 2) there is no gender discrimination; 3) the artisans are of distinct classes from warriors; 4) the warriors live communally, may not own private property, and undergo rigorous training; 5) all marriages and childbearing are state-facilitated; 6) offspring of good citizens are to become guardians, and offsprings of bad citizens are handed to the state to become artisans. The similarity to the *Republic's kallipolis* places emphasis on some differences, such as the exclusion of divinity, soul, or the metaphors of the sun. Also, Socrates claims to see his *polis* in practical life whilst he acknowledges the *kallipolis* as an ideal and unachievable society. After a summary of the state, they move on to the story of Atlantis, presented by Hermocrates and Critias, where the mythical state of Atlantis and the glory of Athens are contrasted, and then the great defeat by Sparta due to ignorance of leaders of state. This is largely identical to what Plato writes in his *Republic* in claiming the necessity of a wise and capable leader of state, thus a dramatic irony that echoes Plato's earlier works without notable differences. The dialogue then moves to the host: three monologues of Timaeus. These are closely linked to the depiction of Plato in *The School of Athens* if we see Timaeus' philosophical ideas as a resemblance of Plato's; These connections will be mentioned below [5].

In the first monologue, Timaeus begins with the creation of man: the distinction between being and becoming, the principles of causality, the role of divine craftsmanship and the demiurge, and the metaphysical extent to which we can be confident that any account is true regarding that with which it is concerned. A focus is on the Demiurge, or what Timaeus believes to be, the principal cause of the cosmos. He created the cosmic body, a perfect and smooth sphere by drawing upon the four elements – fire, earth, air, and water – in equal proportion. This is followed by the cosmic soul, time, and lesser gods created in mythical and sophisticated processes. In the second monologue, Timaeus tells a story of Necessity, the random, erroneous, irrational, or material cause of cosmic formation that intends to explain the imperfections and irrationalities inherent in divine craftsmanship and proceeds to explain how the four elements are combined to create countless substances. In the third monologue, Timaeus finally addresses the creation of men, with all other life forms, being lent to the other lesser gods, and thus often less perfect. Man's soul are seeds planted in the divine soil, often more or less visible of efficacy. The entire body is crafted by divine God, as Timaeus claims, from organs to the physical outlook, both capable of flourishing and subject to collapse and decay, leading up to reincarnation [6]. In all the said monologues, one detail of notice is Timaeus' claim that cowardly and unjust men will be reincarnated as women, a rare piece of evidence of gender imbalance in Plato's work.

The linkages between the dialogue and the painting lie in the heavy reliance on divinity and heaven. Plato's gesture of pointing up to the sky is nonetheless corresponding to many of his broader philosophical thoughts including the ultimate pursuit of traversing to heaven and reincarnation, but in the context of *Timaeus*, the depiction accurately reflects the Demiurge as the principal cause of all matter in the cosmos, or the formation of the cosmos from divinity. We can say that the heaven that Plato points to alludes to divine power and craftsmanship that comprise the demiurge and his lesser gods, which serves as a fundamental basis for his philosophical system in explaining the origins of all changing and unchanging objects.

2.2 Nicomachean Ethics and Aristotle

Nicomachean Ethics, a treatise on ethics, explores the best ways one may achieve happiness [7]. He claims that the supreme human good is *eudaimonia*, translating to flourishing or living well, and is achieved by living virtuously in accordance with reason. Common conceptions are addressed, as Aristotle acknowledges that common people equate happiness with sensual pleasure, embodying irrationality as exemplified in animals and children. Still others may consider honor and esteem as a means to happiness. However, Aristotle argues that happiness is self-sufficient and agood, not necessarily that which makes us happy. More explicit explanations suggest that humans may only achieve happiness after death, as life is considered as a whole, where one ought to act virtuously, with the rational part of the soul gaining control of the irrational parts: vegetative and appetitive. Virtue is then divided into intellectual and moral virtue, though this essay will not dive in deeply to specify. The individual must function well and be sustained through the development of the habituation of just voluntary action, as people must be accustomed to act voluntarily in good and moral ways, and this is cultivated through habituation, via the study of natural science, including physics and math, that practice rationality, intellect, and practical wisdom, according to Aristotle [8]. He states that children and animals begin with irrationality, while only children have the capacity for change

or the possession of reason, through which education is delivered in the form of scientific experiments and observations [9].

Observably, Aristotle's philosophy is extremely consistent with his depiction in *The School of Athens*. Pointing to Earth echoes many of his broad Aristotelian ideas, including the value of science and physics to understand the formation and function of the world. Focusing on his *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which Aristotle further stresses the need for science and rationality in the state to achieve the highest happiness, the Earth alludes to the physical nature of matter, as well as all the Earthly concerns that are yet to be accounted for in many other pre-existent works, such as death, and the absence of reincarnation, heaven, and mythical imaginations that are rather afloat and suspended in the air. The idea of rationality to philosophers is further insinuated in the gesture of pointing to the observable and empirical ground, solid and certain, in comparison to the unobservable atop the vault.

2.3 Timaeus and Nicomachean Ethics

Comparisons between *Timaeus* and *Nicomachean Ethics* are especially notable content-wise, however, further details can reveal similarities and differences on the same subjects.

First, in metaphysics, while both philosophers comment on observables—in *Timaeus*, the classification of objects and the being-becoming criteria; in *Nicomachean Ethics*, the idea of potentiality and actuality, along with the function of reason—the two philosophers treat the subject in distinct ways. Plato's dialogue in *Timaeus* presents a dualistic framework where the realm of intelligible forms underpins the material world, categorizing objects based on their degree of participation in the forms. This classification serves to underscore the dynamic interplay between being (the eternal and unchanging) and becoming (the temporal and mutable). In contrast, Aristotle's analysis in *Nicomachean Ethics* revolves around the practical implementation of potentiality and actuality, positioning human reason as the guiding principle that actualizes one's inherent capabilities. Here, potentiality signifies the inherent possibilities within individuals, while actuality represents the fulfillment of those possibilities through virtuous action. Thus, while both philosophers engage with metaphysical concepts concerning reality and existence, Plato's focus leans toward abstract classification, whereas Aristotle emphasizes practical applications in ethical character development. Both philosophers stress the importance of metaphysics, but Plato insinuates that philosophers ought to be metaphysicians, while Aristotle argues that all men should understand metaphysics through the practice of reason, to achieve *Eudaimonia*, the greatest happiness. This explains the different gestures of the two philosophers.

Most fundamentally, we observe a difference in their views on the innate characteristics of men, especially their sources of knowledge. In *Timaeus*, men are presented as creations of divine power, of lesser gods like Necessity, who act imperfectly and inconsistently out of need, while the soul is nourished in the divine garden, meaning all knowledge and experiences a soul gathers potentially come from differentiated heavenly manipulation. Thus, traits of men and life are predetermined by divinity, and nothing is mentioned about any capacity to change; instead, imperfections are explained by and faulted to Necessity. However, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle underlines men's capacity to actualize *eudaimonia*, as he makes the comparison between children and animals; predetermined knowledge is rarely discussed, and divine influence is overshadowed by the potential to change from observing and practicing science and reason. This justifies the gesturing in the painting that emphasizes the different opinions regarding the source of being and knowledge in the works.

In the bigger picture, the above also uncovers fundamental differences between the master and his apprentice. The main difference lies in their distinct approach to reality. Plato believes that true reality exists in an abstract realm of perfect "forms", arguing that the physical world is an imperfect reflection of a higher, unseen reality. Aristotle, however, was a near empiricist who argued reality is found within the physical world through observation, and rejected Plato's theory by believing that "forms" are embedded in physical objects instead of a separate, ideal world [10]. Deriving from this difference in metaphysics, there is also a fundamental difference in epistemology: Plato thought knowledge to be innate and awakened by reason, while Aristotle claimed knowledge to be acquired through sensory experience, observation, and logical analysis [11]. Hence, their conceptions of the *polis* differ, with Plato seeking absolute and perfect justice and virtue, the pursuit of the idealistic form, and Aristotle viewing it through the more practical lens of achieving *eudaimonia* in individuals and their substance.

3 SIDE CHARACTERS

We also observe many familiar faces in the painting, some of the most recognizable of whom include: Socrates, Pythagoras, Archimedes, Ptolemy, and Hypatia [12]. It is important for amateurs to realize that though they are set in the same frame, they do not necessarily belong to the same era, as is most obvious with Socrates and Hypatia, and a few younger faces. The juxtaposition of these characters resembles Raphael's categorization of favored philosophers by discipline and connection, as a means of rejuvenating the large masterpiece [13].

To the left of Plato, a significant figure can be spotted: Socrates, Plato's teacher. Socrates is depicted lecturing to characters of different occupations: warriors, nobles, and likely peasants, demonstrating the practical and social aspect of philosophy, potentially alluding to the ideal *polis* proposed in *The Republic*, reflecting its responsibilities and hierarchical structure.

The rest of the figures named are also celebrated philosophers who delve into mathematics, demonstrating some intimate link with Plato in particular. The gathering to the left includes: Hypatia of Alexandria, the only woman in the

scene, and the intellectual heir of Plato, future head of the Neoplatonist school, who is believed to be one of the first women to study math but also a proponent of Plato's idealism. Beside her are Pythagoras and Archimedes, busy with mathematical work. To the right, we see Euclid engaged in a mathematical discussion, and Ptolemy holding a globe in his hand to discuss the stars and the Earth.

However, we can also observe an interesting placement of all characters by considering the weight of astrophysics and mathematics placed at the two bottom edges of the painting. Unlike the mathematicians and physicists, the figures depicted on the stairs are those more preoccupied with Platonic ideals or are themselves characters in many of the Platonic dialogues, including Zeno and Plotinus, who expanded ideas like "the one" in Plato's *Republic*. Summarizing the image, a perceptive choice of placement can be observed, as Neoplatonists are placed in the upper part of the school, corresponding to Plato's upward point, while more Aristotelian thinkers, mathematicians, crawl and crumple in the corners and on the ground, observing nature, corresponding to Aristotle's point to Earth. It might also be interesting to note that, while Hypatia does reconcile with Aristotelian physics despite her Neoplatonic philosophical framework from Plotinus, she is placed in the middle of the artwork, as a hybrid philosopher. A similar placement occurs with Diogenes, lying across the stairs of the school, a Cynic philosopher who rejected both Platonic and Aristotelian approaches.

4 IN THE RENAISSANCE CONTEXT

Placing the artwork in context, *The School of Athens*, by Raphael, is a work of art from the Renaissance, commissioned by Pope Julius II to decorate his private library. On the one hand, the polarization and conflict between religion and science had become prevalent [14], echoing a core theme demonstrated in this painting, as it is painted opposite *Disputa*, a painting of fierce theology, to insinuate the balance and harmony needed between the two prevalent schools of thought. On the other hand, the dynamic and powerful revival of ancient Greek philosophy that was vigorously pursued during the Renaissance further empowered the creation of these powerful philosophical figures [15]. Some interpretations suggest that the intention was to shed glory upon these preeminent characters, whose ideas were transformed into the backbone of Christianity in order to solidify the power of the Church, which is self-explanatory if the request is made by a pope of a transformative era.

It is hard to say if any subjectivity on the part of Raphael is present in the work, disregarding the "glorification" of figures and the tension between idealists and empiricists, but the context of the Renaissance generally adds more nuance to the work of art as the very ideals of classical thinkers are brought to share the stage.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, regardless of whether *The School of Athens* is in any way a means for Raphael or Pope Julius II to consolidate or denote the church-state polarization during the Renaissance period, the masterpiece suggests an important difference between Plato and Aristotle, namely between forms and beauty versus metaphysics and physics. The groups of side characters may also represent important categorizations of philosophical approaches, from sophistry and arithmetic to astrophysics and stargazing, and their relation to the central conflict between Plato and Aristotle. Though sometimes regarded as obvious and uninteresting, future scholars in areas like philosophy and art history may be able to explore in depth the interplay between artistic choices and intention, interpreting classical philosophy in the context of the Renaissance. However, claims may remain speculative due to the distant and vague nature of artistic expression.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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