

“Plato and Aristotle,” by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, 9/20/26



Numbers 21:4b-9; John 3:13-17

*[T]he LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."*

*So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.*

This reading rolls around once or twice per year. It symbolizes God offering a way to relieve the suffering of the people. Which is helpful, because God was the one who sent the poisonous serpents to punish the people. After the people were complaining about wandering around in the wilderness and having no food and no water, *"[T]he Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died."*

And so, the bronze serpent was a means for preventing their death after their disobedience. And please also note that the bronze serpent kept the people from dying, but it *did not* prevent them from being bitten. A measured dose of mercy.

In our Gospel reading, there is a clear link to this image of the bronze serpent, likening Jesus to that ancient object: *And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of*

*Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."*

This passage is a cornerstone of Christianity. Jesus is how we are saved. But saved from what? Saved from God's punishment of our sins.

And if we maintain a close connection between the purpose of the bronze serpent for the Israelites and the purpose of Jesus in our lives, then we might wonder about the suffering in our lives. Are we suffering because of what we have done, and Jesus is the means to live but not to avoid all that suffering? What is the nature of human suffering?

And for that matter, what is the purpose of life?

One way of understanding such purpose is religion or theology. Religion as the practices and traditions relating to the worship of God and theology as a way of understanding God. But there are other ways to consider how we might live. Such as philosophy.

Our painting today is from the Vatican, a large fresco by Raphael from the rooms of the Apostolic Palace. There are three frescos along the walls of the room. One depicts important figures from the world of theology and another from literature. The third painting is our subject for this morning, showing important figures from the realm of philosophy.

The fresco is called the Schools of Athens, and it depicts many robed figures arrayed on some steps in a large building with arched ceilings and white marble statues. These figures, almost solely men, are engaged in debate and conversation. Some are scribbling with chalk of slates on the ground – I think that is supposed to be the mathematician Euclid. Some are gesticulating to make a point, like any self-respecting Mediterranean. Some sit in quiet contemplation, their minds turning over some unknown question or perhaps what is for lunch.

In the center are two figures, a white-haired old man and middle-aged man with dark hair. These are the only two figures in the fresco that we can identify with certainty. The old man is Plato and the younger man is Aristotle. And from a certain perspective, they are the only two people necessary for this painting. The rest are decoration for the philosophical world built by these two men.

One modern philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, once remarked, the entire field of European philosophy is simply footnotes to the works of Plato. Even the works of Aristotle, Plato's most famous student, could be described as an extended reaction to Plato. Broadly speaking, Plato and Aristotle are truly the twin pillars of European philosophy and, as such, they are foundational for what has been called Western civilization.

For those of you who do not frequently thumb through copies of Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Ethics*, I will sketch out the relevant major themes of their work. Plato is best known for his Theory of Forms. The world around us is not real, or at least not as real as the underlying forms, the eternal, unchanging essence of all things. All that is around us is in imitation of that unchanging perfection. These forms are more real, or one might say, less real to us because they have nothing to do with our less than perfect world.

Beauty, truth, and goodness are ultimate forms that human beings, and life in general, patterns itself after. But because these are not originals, like any copy, they will be plagued with

imperfections. And so, we aspire toward the forms, the Platonic ideals, without any ability to achieve that perfection. The mind reaches out to the unattainable while our bodies remain bound by worldly limitations.

Aristotle is far harder to encapsulate with a few ideas because his work broadly covered most areas of ancient and even modern thought. He is credited with inventing logic, the systematic formulation of proofs to build upon and to verify ideas. And, I will surmise without any basis for doing so, that this was because of his reaction to the ideas of Plato. Plato turned to intangible forms and ideas as the unreachable template for the world. Which of course means you get to speculate endlessly about something you defined as being ultimately unknowable. I would guess that made for long and occasionally pointless conversations.

Aristotle formulated logic and is considered the first scientist. Rather than being satisfied, or better yet stumped, by these distant forms, Aristotle sought to understand the world directly. To study and then to consider what that study means in a disciplined way. He did not reject Plato's forms, but he approached them from the real world, as a blend of both substance and essence. Substance means the stuff we are made of and essence is the ultimate identity of the thing – essence being the closest connection to Plato's forms. Simply put, you can have a wooden chair or a stone chair, but a chair is a chair.

These two ideas, one about intangible perfection and the other about worldly specifics, are obviously important philosophical ideas. But they are also *essential* religious ideas. When you peel away some of the philosophical language of Plato, you come to realize that his ideas are basically the framework for the Christian idea of God. All these forms can be further simplified into something known as the One, the ultimate creative force that is the origin of all things but which itself has no origin. The One, also known as the Good, has various emanations, sometimes leading to other perfected forms but also its lesser worldly creations.

The One creating everything. Or, as you might have heard elsewhere, *"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters."*

The Book of Genesis predates the writings of Plato, but neither Plato nor Aristotle pretended that they had not built upon the writings and teachings of others. Plato reacted to the teachings of his teacher, Socrates, and we almost exclusively know of the work of Socrates through Plato's writing. Aristotle in turn reacted to Plato, but his scientific and logical systems built on rather than place aside Plato's ideas. One built the table, the other set the table.

That line about all philosophy being footnotes to Plato relies upon the survival of Plato's work rather than the complete originality of his ideas. He gathered and responded to others and yet we have no easy way to discern what was his work or what was from others. And so, when religious ideas about creation seem to be suspiciously close to the forms of Plato and the logic of Aristotle, there is nothing nefarious going on. There were no academic boundaries around religion, philosophy, and what would come to be known as science. It was all a bunch of guys sitting on some steps in Athens, or Nicaea, arguing about how to organize their thoughts about the world.

And so, when the early church fathers were trying to sort out the church and God and everything else, they had the written works of Plato and Aristotle to consider. This was not surreptitious or

behind the scenes. It was a clear reliance upon their philosophical framework. The story of creation informs that framework and that framework is later used to interpret that story.

For example, in our readings today there is a reference to the serpent. Most Christians would assume that a serpent was a bad thing, relying upon the serpent in the Garden of Eden leading Adam and Eve astray. But the symbol of the serpent was not originally intended as one of evil, but of craftiness or wisdom. “Philosophy” can be translated from Greek as a love of wisdom.

So how was wisdom a factor in the Garden of Eden? The serpent explained to Eve that if she ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, she would not die like God had declared but she would become like God. She and Adam ate the fruit, and they did not die, but came to know that Good and Evil existed in the world. Adam and Eve were punished, as was the serpent, but that was because they disobeyed God. And they became like God, and thus “dying” to their old carefree life.

The wisdom they gained would transform them into human beings, suffering now because the world is not an idyllic garden but instead a place of struggle. Later Christian thinkers turned this story into one about evil, with the serpent being likened to Satan. But that was not the case then. Even the depictions of Satan, or the Adversary, in the Bible show him working with God. In the story of Job, Satan had a role to play. He was not there to cause suffering in spite of God.

Why then did it change? Because, I would guess, people needed a way to understand human suffering. Better to attribute it to someone like Satan than to God, recalling again that it was God who sent the serpents to bite the people in the Book of Exodus, not Satan. If God made the world to include suffering as an unavoidable consequence of existence, it is a troubling notion.

And it is one reason why the Platonic ideas of the One and the Good become associated with God. Suffering arises from the failures of human beings and the interference by the wily serpent that came to be known as Satan. That is the new version, the post-Job interpretation.

Plato and Aristotle are intertwined, like a teacher and a student would be, but they are also in opposition. Plato had his students ponder imponderable ideas about goodness and beauty, essence and spirit. Aristotle reacted against that, I would suggest, and turned instead to logic and observation. Just the facts, ma’am, just the facts. The wide sweep of Platonic thought gets funneled through the narrow keyhole of Aristotelian inquiry.

And when this gets applied to religion, God is the all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful entity beyond our frame of easy reference. The Church and its clergy mediate between the remoteness of the divine and the practicalities of the world. And the believers just need to listen and everything will be great. That system lasts unchallenged for about 1,200 years until the Reformation [Note: 1,200 years after the Council of Nicaea].

But slightly before the Reformation, the Renaissance, of which this painting is a signature example, was inspired by Greek thought. The precipitating event for the Renaissance was arguably the fall of the city of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire in 1453. The last vestiges of the Roman Empire in its Byzantine incarnation come to an end. But Constantinople had been a repository of Greek texts, religious and philosophical. Greek priests and scholars fled, heading to the west. They carried with them their precious books and their precious ability to read those books. People began to study those texts and, of course, they learned Ancient Greek which was mostly a lost language in the Western Church.

Constantinople was conquered in 1453 and this painting was completed in 1511. Within five decades, Western Europe had been culturally engulfed by these old Greek texts which inspired new ways of thinking. For example, Raphael used mathematical principles of perspective projection to show objects as they might appear in real life. The larger figures in the foreground, the central figures of Plato and Aristotle at the center. The shrinking tunnel of the archways focusing attention inward and backward.

And the anatomical accuracy – one modern surgeon looked at this painting and diagnosed one figure as having varicose veins. This is also the figure widely believed to have been patterned after Michelangelo. This may have been the younger Raphael's not so subtle dig at an older, more famous contemporary artist. Notice there is one character staring out from the painting, a young rather beatific man who bears a striking resemblance to portraits of Raphael.

And, by the way, within six years of this painting's completion, Martin Luther would nail his 95 Theses to the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg, marking the traditional start to the Reformation. The artist Michelangelo coincidentally is said to have been an early and secret adherent to what would become Protestant theology. Protestant theology that would decenter the Church as the source of all worldly power and religious authority, instead turning that power over to the people, to the growing numbers of literate and questioning Europeans.

Again, Greek philosophy plays an important role. Like this tableau of thinkers scribbling on the ground and arguing on the steps, the reformers wanted to reopen the old pronouncements of the Church, decisions set in stone a thousand years before.

Why was only the Church empowered to dictate God's desires on earth? Why could there not be debate about these ideas about God and the soul, goodness and beauty, essence and spirit?

Plato observed that these ideas were beyond human understanding and Aristotle responded to these ideas with direct observation and inquiry, careful logic and discipline. But the Church had done all that thinking already and would accept no dispute of its authority.

Centuries of fighting and political upheaval later, and you have the formal split between the Catholic Church's more monolithic system and a riot of Protestant experiments across the world. I am not trying to pick a horse in this race, but given that we are currently sitting in one of those Protestant laboratories of experimentation, I might note a few points.

The Catholic Church did not encourage people to read the Bible because the Bible can be confusing. People might misunderstand what they are reading and what the Church teaches. And I would say all of that is true – if you thought serpents in the Bible were always evil, you might have fallen into such a trap. The Bible cannot be understood on its surface with ease or predictability.

Conversely, the Protestants' overarching concern about reading the Bible and finding a more personal and direct connection to God, without the intermediary role of the Church, led to a literate population. You needed to be able to read to read the Bible. That social shift led to people willing to question ancient expectations and hidebound traditions. That new instinct will in time lead to the revolution of the Enlightenment, a revolution of thought, as well as revolutions of politics in places like the United States, France, Russia, and beyond.

Because when the Protestants opened the door to question the teachings of the Catholic Church, that door did not close. People kept questioning and came to question the teachings of these new religious traditions. Some questioned the very notion of religion.

And yet, it is easy to trace these questioning efforts back to our old friends Plato and Aristotle. When the American revolutionaries call out for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, they are channeling John Locke who like Aristotle tried to focus on what might be known and observed. It was a scientific application of philosophy that turned away from the innate forms and, in many respects, from the trappings of traditional religion. Locke, by the way, was a Puritan but he would later reject ideas like predestination and rely upon God's gift of human reason. Or, might we say, the knowledge of good and evil that we somehow came across in a garden long ago.

Religion remains a tug of war between the ideals of Plato and the logic of Aristotle. The problem, as I see it, is that this struggle is always played out at the endpoints of the spectrum. If I focus on God as all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing, then I must struggle with the presence of suffering and evil in the world. If I instead focus on the practical, on the observable, on the scientific, then I have limited ability to embrace ideas like goodness or beauty without it seeming like a betrayal of my hard-edged reason.

And as we will see over the coming weeks, the coldness of the Enlightenment inspires the warmth of Romanticism which then turns into the more hopeful yet painfully neurotic expression of Modernism. Back and forth, back and forth. We get tired of the uncertainties of Plato and switch to logic of Aristotle. We grow weary of the bloodless science of Aristotle and turn to the beauty and ecstasy of Plato. Again and again.

One untried revolution in human history is moderation. That we do not simply lurch from one extreme to another like a scything pendulum, but instead we just assume that a little of this and a little of that might work. It's worth a try for once.

We need the big ideas of Plato and we need the direct personal experience of Aristotle.

We need the concept of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, and we need to realize that human beings are the hands, eyes, and heart of God on this earth.

We need Jesus as our guide, our teacher, and our example, but if we render him as a remote figure only to be worshipped, we in effect throw away the moral and ethical teachings he spent most of his ministry teaching.

We need the beauty and the practicality. We need God and we need community. We need to be *of the church* and we need to *be the church*. We need to embrace more than one idea at a time which in my experience is the hardest challenge of all.

But no one ever said that church was going to be easy. Church takes work. But it is good work. Very good work. Amen.