

Opposites in Plato and Aristotle

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I. Introduction

Even the most cursory overview of pre-Socratic philosophy will show that many of the pre-Socratics dealt with opposites in their theories. Aristotle recognized this about his predecessors,¹ though his statement may be a generalization.² The idea of opposites figures prominently into the thought of Hippocrates, Parmenides, the Pythagoreans, Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Anaxagoras, among others.³ There is even precedent for rhetorical use of opposites as far back as Homer.⁴ Though many of these thinkers differed in their approaches to particular opposites, there was rarely doubt “that *some* correlation was to be set up between these [hot and cold, wet and dry] and other pairs of opposites.”⁵ By the time of Plato and Aristotle there was a large and long-standing precedent for using opposites in both rhetoric and philosophical thought.

We are intuitively aware of opposites—Simmias is taller than Socrates, which means that Socrates is shorter than Simmias. Warnock helps define the concept of opposites by stating that opposites are part of a same range. Opposite is, in a spatial metaphor that Aristotle uses, the furthest away you can get from something without leaving the same road.⁶ They “must be of the same kind, though *of* that kind, as different as possible.”⁷

Any theory of opposites will have to sufficiently address at least the following questions: first, how do we come to know the ideas themselves, the terms that we call opposites? Second, how do we apply those ideas to make distinctions like “Socrates is smaller than Simmias?” Third, how can an object or person progress from one opposite to the other, like Socrates being small but growing to become a large man? Fourth, how self-consistent is the theory? The more of these questions a theory of opposites can answer, and the better it can do so, the more cogent it is. The purpose of this paper is to look at what Plato and Aristotle did with the concepts of opposites⁸ that they inherited from the pre-Socratics and which of the two philosophers has a more cogent theory of opposites, if such a distinction can be made.

II. Opposites in Plato’s Forms

Before Plato the concept of opposites was treated very generally and haphazardly, the pre-Socratics not making distinctions between different classes of opposites and assuming that opposites could only be predicated one at a time by a single object. Plato’s major contribution to the discussion of opposites was his elucidation of when it is possible to predicate a pair of opposites of the same subject at the same time, but he did not go much beyond this new idea.⁹ To further this discussion, other aspects of Plato’s thought must be fleshed out, which will require drawing from various discussions in his dialogues to find pertinent information.

Plato’s ontology is that particular things are the least real and eternal forms the most real. We don’t come to know and understand these opposites in life—our understanding of them is

recollection of encounters with the eternal forms before birth.¹⁰ They never change, which is why we can speak of the Tall, the Short, and others—they always have been, and always will be.

In the *Phaedo* Socrates discusses the theory of forms and various properties of the forms themselves.¹¹ He talks about the Tall and the Short, comparing himself as the shortest, Simmias a little taller, followed by Phaedo, who is the tallest of the three.¹² Apparently this means that Simmias has both tallness (in relation to Socrates) and shortness (in relation to Phaedo). Earlier in the dialogue Socrates introduces an argument that everything comes from its opposite.¹³ So what is the nature of opposites in the forms? Is there an opposite for every one of the forms?

Because Plato's theory is that these opposite forms actually exist, there are only three approaches to these opposites that can be used—closely mirroring the three options presented by the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist*.¹⁴ First, that there are opposites for every form; second, that no forms have opposites; and third, that some of the forms have opposites, and others do not. Plato does not decisively pick one of these three approaches, so they must be examined each in turn.

Support for the idea that there are opposites for every form can be found in several of Plato's other dialogues. In the *Protagoras* is a discussion of opposites such as beauty and ugliness, good and bad, shrill and deep noises, and others.¹⁵ Socrates asks, "so whatever is done in a certain way is done through the agency of a certain quality, and whatever is done in the opposite way is done through the agency of its opposite?"¹⁶

In the *Phaedo* one of the arguments that Socrates gives for the immortality of the soul is as follows: if everything has a quality, it came to be from the opposite of that quality. If someone is tall then they must have been short, and if someone is alive, they must have been dead before, and will return to being dead in the future. According to this, all states arise from their opposites,¹⁷ thus there must be opposites.

There are two major problems with this approach. The first is the example of the three men's height. Simmias is said to be both tall (participates in the Tall) and short (participates in the Small). But how does this help us make distinctions? What is the purpose of saying that Simmias is tall if Simmias is also short? "How can each member of any pair of opposites be distinguished from the other?"¹⁸ If every form has an opposite, then anything that partakes in that form will also partake in the opposite of that form. Plato stumbled on a reply in the *Republic*, namely "that the same thing will not be willing to do or undergo opposites in the same part of itself, in relation to the same thing, at the same time."¹⁹ But, Nehamas asks, "why then did Plato introduce the forms?"²⁰ Why are they necessary if all that needs to be done is compare the height of Simmias to Socrates and Phaedo?

The second problem arises because Plato is reluctant to say that there are forms of things with negative connotations. If every form has an opposite, there must be forms of things like evil, disease, suffering, ugliness, and so on. This objection is not new; Plato himself raises it the *Parmenides*, where the young Socrates is asked about "things that might seem absurd, like hair and mud and dirt, or anything else undignified and worthless."²¹ Plato seems reluctant to condone ideal forms of negative things, as the young Socrates himself says a few lines later, noting that the theory of forms is not fully thought-out yet. Plato never responded to the

objection he has Parmenides pose further than what the young Socrates says in the next few lines.

To explain how Plato can deny the existence of some forms requires looking at the second approach to opposites in the theory of forms—that there are no opposites. This approach has no direct textual evidence but results from Plato’s reluctance to say that there is a form of Evil, or that the Ugly exists. It will be illuminating here to return to the earlier mentioned example of the respective heights of Socrates, Simmias, and Phaedo. In order to deny the existence of, say, the Short, one must say that each of these three partakes of the Tall. This means that Simmias does not participate in both the Short and the Tall. He participates less in the Tall than Phaedo does, but more than Socrates does.

There are a few potential problems with this approach. Perhaps it isn’t that Phaedo participates the most in the Tall, and the other two less so; perhaps it is that Socrates participates the most in the Short, and the other two less so. Of the two forms, which is a better choice, the Tall or the Short? Can there be any reasonable explanation for choosing one over the other? Any who advocate this position of no opposites in the theory of forms must pick one opposite form over the other—but in this and many other instances there is no good warrant on which to base a decision.

The next objection arises from the recollection argument in the *Phaedo*.²² According to that argument, in this life we never encounter “the Beautiful itself, the Good itself, the Just, the Pious,” and others.²³ Since we have never learned of them here, we must have existed before we were born and learned of them ideas sometime before our birth. The objection is: if there are not forms of things like the Ugly, the Bad, the Unjust, the Impious, and so on, then where do we get our ideas of them? We do not simply have an idea of the Good, and say that Hitler participates less in the Good than Gandhi. We call Hitler “evil,” not simply “not-good,” and have genuine conception of evil. With Plato’s account, where does our concept of the Evil come from, if not the same place our concept of the Good came from? The issue is further complicated when it’s discovered that Plato sometimes even had terms for the intermediates between two opposites,²⁴ sometimes leading us to not just two but *three* terms for describing the level of a particular attribute.²⁵

The last objection is that in various places Plato himself mentions opposites, as we have discussed before. A good example, one that will move us into a discussion of the third approach to opposites, comes from the *Protagoras* where Socrates and Protagoras discuss various opposites such as beauty, ugliness, goodness, badness, shrill noises and deep tones.²⁶ It can be assumed that Plato believes there are at least some opposites in the forms, and so the second approach, that there are none, is refuted.

The third approach concerning opposites is to propose that some forms have opposites, and others do not. If we wish to avoid forms like the Evil, as well as others with negative connotations, then we can easily do this by relegating them to the category of forms that do not have opposites. After all, “there is no reason to believe *a priori* that *every* argument Plato uses generates a Form for every general term.”²⁷

There are also other places where Plato discusses what may be termed “neutral forms.” They have no opposites, and no moral connotations. An example would be the discussion at the beginning of *The Republic* book X concerning the form of a bed.²⁸ There obviously isn’t an opposite of “bedness.” This would then be relegated to the second category—that of not having an opposite.²⁹

But where would the line be drawn? Which forms would have opposites? The most intuitive idea would be to draw it at the distinction between metaphysical and physical. The dividing line might be set between forms related to physical attributes (e.g. the Tall, the Fast, etc.) that have opposites (e.g. the Short, the Slow, etc.) and those forms with metaphysical attributes (e.g. the Just, the Virtuous, the Pious, etc.) that do not have opposites. This would make a person unjust because they lack participation in the Just. That same person could be short because they participate in the Short, not because they participate less in the Tall.

This sounds like a good idea. Though the dividing line can be drawn at places other than the quick example in the above paragraph, eternal forms of the things with negative connotations need not exist, and other useful opposites can be kept.

Unfortunately a few of the same objections used to counter the first two approaches can also apply here. First, Plato discusses forms of these things with negative connotations and the argument from recollection reminds us that somewhere we must have encountered the Ugly in order for us to have a concept of it. Second, the argument from opposites says that in order to have one thing it must be generated from its opposite.

The third and strongest objection is one that is limited only to this third approach. Where is a satisfactory place to draw the line? One possible place was outlined above, at the physical/metaphysical line, to distinguish between forms with opposites and those without, but by no means was this distinction adequate. In some ways this distinction itself is problematic. Is bedness a characteristic in the physical world? That would seem to be the case—something doesn’t participate in bedness unless it has physical characteristics. But the only conceivable opposite of bedness is non-bedness, which is useless to describe the attributes of an object.³⁰ Another example is the Beautiful and the Ugly. Using the term in the sense of physical beauty (since we can call a piece of poetry beautiful but not ugly) means that any beautiful thing must physically exist. This is problematic if the distinction is drawn at the physical/metaphysical line, since the Ugly is one of those negative forms; yet beauty is a physical property. Obviously this quick distinction is not complete. But can there be a completely satisfactory distinction made between which forms have opposites and which do not?

With this reconstruction of all the possibilities of Plato’s theory, how does his theory answer the questions posed in the introduction? The answer to the first question, how do we come to know the opposite ideas, comes from the theory of recollection presented in the *Phaedo*. At some time in the past our souls dwelt with the forms, so we have knowledge of them. The objection to this answer is that we cannot know for sure if we ever were in such a place. The more intuitive answer is that we merely look at two rocks, for example, and notice that one is bigger than the other. This postulation of a realm of forms is philosophically burdensome as it unnecessarily complicates the issue.

In response to the second question, distinctions like “Socrates is smaller than Simmias” can be made. However, it seems they are made using empirical evidence, as Socrates does in the *Phaedo*. We do not have to use the forms themselves as a means of measuring and comparing.³¹ They are unnecessary to answer this question.

The third question, how a person progresses from one opposite to another, like growing taller, cannot be answered. We say that a tall person participates more in the Tall, but Plato gives no explanation as to how, for example, a baby progresses from participating in the Short (or not participating very much in the Tall) to becoming an adult who participates in the Tall.

And what of self-consistency? It is the case that Plato’s theory is not fully thought out concerning how opposites function in the Forms. It has been fleshed out above and no matter which approach is used the theory is not self-consistent. It further seems that it will never be shown to be self-consistent concerning this particular aspect.

From this brief overview Plato’s theory cannot adequately perform the functions that a cogent theory of opposites should. His theory of forms is plagued by its own metaphysical assumptions and problems, and it cannot adequately answer any of the four criteria posed in the introduction.

III. Aristotle’s Discussion of Contraries

Aristotle’s discussion of opposites³² is more complex and delineated than Plato’s.³³ He was the first thinker to create a systematic analysis of opposites,³⁴ and outlines the four different classes of opposites in chapters 10 and 11 of the *Categories*. Those four classes are: correlatives, contraries, privatives to positives, and affirmatives to negatives.³⁵

Correlatives are opposites explained by reference to the other. For example, something known is the opposite of knowledge. Double and half are the opposites that Aristotle introduces as examples. There must be a double *of something*. The term “double” and whatever that something is—sophists, apple pie, football tickets—is its opposite. They are interdependent since one cannot exist without the other. There cannot be a double of nothing. This is very much parallel to part of his earlier discussion of relatives.³⁶

Contraries are more what Plato’s forms are concerned with—general terms. For example, “the good is not spoken of as the good *of the bad*, but as *the contrary of the bad*.”³⁷ These are opposites of a different kind than correlatives, since the overabundance of one will result in the annihilation of the other. This means they are not interdependent.

Privatives and positives both refer to the same subject. For example, “blind” and “seeing” are both predicated of an eye. The natural state of this subject is to have the positive, in this case sight. In order to be true opposites, these must both be predicated of a single object, much like contraries. If Socrates is blind, and Phaedo can see, then “blind” and “seeing” are not, in this instance, true opposites. Socrates is either blind or not—this is a statement that shows how privatives and positives are opposites. Privatives and positives are also not interdependent.

Affirmatives and negatives deal with individual statements. “Health” and “sickness” cannot be true statements since they are not statements. However, a sentence like “Socrates is sick” is a statement. As such, it can be either true or false. Affirmatives and negatives are two statements about the world that are mutually contradictory. In more modern terms this is the law of excluded middle. Either Socrates is sick, or he is not. Affirmatives and negatives are also not interdependent.

Of these four classes of opposites, only privates and positives as well as contraries are relevant to this paper. They deal with the same types of differences that Plato’s forms do. Correlatives as well as affirmatives and negatives, though opposites in the sense that Aristotle uses them, are not opposites of the kind this paper is concerned with.

Both privatives and positives and contraries can be further explained by using Aristotle’s ontology. In Plato’s ontology the most real things are the eternal forms, but Aristotle’s ontology states that the most real things are the particulars.³⁸ In *On Generation and Corruption* he discusses how things change because of changes in properties of the underlying substratum.³⁹ Bronze might be made into a coin, a rod, a sword, or a statue—but it is always bronze. If it is mixed with different alloys, you have not changed the properties; you have changed the actual substratum itself. Aristotle calls this change of substratum coming to be and passing away.⁴⁰

This closely mirrors his discussion in the *Categories*, though the vocabulary is different. Instead of “substratum” he uses “substance,” and instead of “property” he uses “accident.” Even with different terms the point is much the same—substance cannot admit variation of degree,⁴¹ but the accidents of that substance can change. It is “a distinctive mark of substance [. . .] that, while remaining numerically one and the same, it is capable of admitting contrary qualities.”⁴²

An objection can be raised here that Aristotle uses the example of “blind” and “seeing,”⁴³ which are of course opposites. But what about those that have bad vision? The privative and positive of “blind” and “seeing” has intermediates, but Aristotle does not discuss this. However, the objection is easily enough dealt with. First, as was noted above⁴⁴ that there might just be semantic evolution at work regarding how the spectrum of a particular attribute is described. If were is the case that the language developed so that there is no specific term for a person who sees badly, it is certainly not Aristotle’s fault. Surely Aristotle understood that some people can see better than others. A stronger reply is that Aristotle is correct—though sight and blindness admit of intermediates, using the law of excluded middle we can say that either one can see or one cannot see. And that does not create intermediates.

In the *Physics* Aristotle freely admits that most of his predecessors used opposites as the principles of movement.⁴⁵ It would seem that he himself has followed suit and adopted at least this idea into his own theories. It is not a defining characteristic to be short for anybody; Socrates might someday be tall. This means that being short, or tall, is an accident. It is a property of Socrates, not a necessary condition for being Socrates. Socrates is moving away from being short and moving towards being tall. It is merely a way of describing change or movement.

Aristotle discusses how this change or movement occurs in the *Metaphysics*. He discusses two states of every object regarding the accidents of that object—actuality and potentiality.⁴⁶ For

example, an acorn is potentially an oak tree, but an oak tree has become actualized. It is no longer *potentially* an oak tree.

Potencies, or potentialities, “are either innate, like the senses, or come by practice.”⁴⁷ Health is something that is innate for most humans, but being a musician is something that can be learned. In each potentiality, whether innate or acquired, lies the capability for something to be moved or altered. The earth cannot move or be altered to become a man,⁴⁸ but a builder may build a house, taking the material’s potentiality and actualizing them into a dwelling.⁴⁹ Someone or something must act upon the object or person with potentiality in order to change the potentiality into actuality, but if all of the necessary elements are there something has potentiality to be changed into some actuality.⁵⁰ For example, a tall pole can potentially be shorter—if it is acted upon and chopped down. A shorter tree can become a larger tree because it has the potential to grow.

One possible objection to Aristotle’s discussion of innate potentialities is that there is really no satisfactory reason to say that an acorn *must* potentially be an oak tree. Why not some other kind of plant? Where does this potentiality come from, and why does this innate potentiality exist the way it does? Aristotle never addresses this possible objection. Potentiality is known by what a thing can become. We do not know why one thing changes into another specific thing.

With this more complex discussion of opposite, how does Aristotle’s theories answer the three questions posed in the introduction? The first two questions are answered together. We come to know opposites by making comparisons, Simmias is shorter than Socrates, and so forth. When we say “a tall tree” we are really saying “a tree larger than another tree”⁵¹ or perhaps larger than average. We must make distinctions in order to even generate the terms like “tall” and “short” in the first place. How does one change from one opposite to the other? First of all, the answer is not plagued by the difficulties outlined above for Plato’s theories. We don’t have to arbitrarily choose which form to have, or determine when a person crosses from more participation in one form, like the Short, to another, like the Tall. Second, given Aristotle’s discussion of potentiality and actuality his theories can more readily account for how an object or a person can change—an infant is *potentially* a tall man. However, Aristotle never describes how innate potentialities work—how it is necessarily the case that an acorn can only become an oak tree.

IV. Conclusions

Plato brings up opposites in the theory of forms, but his writings do not conclusively support any one of the three possible approaches to those opposites. This is not necessarily surprising since Plato never fully maps his theory of forms in the first place, and it must be pieced together.⁵² Furthermore, he cannot adequately answer the first three of the questions posed in the introduction. As far as self-consistency, he is plagued by his own metaphysical assumptions that, under closer examination, cannot hold up.

Aristotle does not make the same metaphysical assumptions. His ontology is quite opposed to Plato’s in that he believes the particular things to be more real whereas Plato believes the universals to be more real. This allows Aristotle to answer Nehamas, in that “in order to derive the (partially) contradictory aspect of sensible particulars, something must remain constant for the contrary properties to apply to.”⁵³

The difference in ontology allows Aristotle to answer the questions that were posed in the introduction in ways that Plato cannot. Aristotle can say that distinctions are made merely by comparing two things to each other, not by their participation (or lack thereof) in a metaphysical form. And since it is not the case that something moves from participation in a form to lack of participation or participation in the opposite form, it is also much easier to understand how an object can move from one opposite to the other, like getting taller or more hot. After all, it is the case that one of the primary characteristics of substances is that they can have contraries in them.⁵⁴ Changes come about because of the interplay between potentiality and actuality as objects and people move from being potential to being actual. We come to know these concepts of opposites to explain some of these changes, like short to tall and hot to cold, not because there are metaphysical forms for objects in the world to participate in. In sum, Aristotle's theories deal more adequately with opposites than does Plato's because they are not forced to deal with the problems associated with Plato's metaphysical assumptions, they answer the three basic questions that any theory of opposites must deal with more readily than Plato's theories, and they are more internally self-consistent. Though Aristotle's theories are not flawless, in this limited topic they are more cogent than Plato's.

¹ Aristotle, *Physics*, 188b 27. All works by Aristotle are cited in Bekker notation, and all direct quotes come from *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

² G. E. R. Lloyd, *Polarity and Analogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966) 15.

³ Ibid., "The Hot and the Cold, the Dry and the Wet in Greek Philosophy," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 84 (1964): 92-93. See also Lloyd, *Polarity*, 16-17.

⁴ Lloyd, *Polarity*, 90-91.

⁵ Lloyd, "Hot and Cold," 105-6.

⁶ Mary Warnock, "A Note on Aristotle: *Categories* 6a 15," *Mind*, New Series, 59 (1950): 552.

⁷ Ibid., 554.

⁸ Specifically opposites between terms, not opposites between statements. Lloyd, *Polarity* 161-62.

⁹ Lloyd, *Polarity* 169-70.

¹⁰ Plato, *Phaedo* 74b-77a. All works by Plato are cited in Stephanus notation, and all direct quotes come from *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

¹¹ Ibid., 102-03.

¹² Ibid., 102b-c.

¹³ Ibid., 71.

¹⁴ Plato, *Sophist*, 252e.

¹⁵ Plato, *Protagoras*, 332.

¹⁶ Ibid., 332c.

¹⁷ Plato, *Phaedo*, 70e-72e.

¹⁸ Alexander Nehamas, "Predication and Forms of Opposites in *Phaedo*," *Review of Metaphysics* 26 (1973): 466.

¹⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 436b.

²⁰ Nehamas, "Predication and Forms," 480.

²¹ Plato, *Parmenides*, 130c.

²² Plato, *Phaedo*, 74b-77a.

²³ Ibid., 75d.

²⁴ Lloyd, *Polarity*, 147. Plato, *Symposium*, 202a.

²⁵ So for some concepts we have one term, like "justice." We use this one term to describe the entire spectrum, the other end being simply "unjust." For other concepts we have two terms to describe the opposite ends of a spectrum,

such as “beautiful” and “ugly.” For yet other concepts there are three terms, like “ignorance,” “correct opinion,” and “wisdom,” which describe both the ends and the middle of the spectrum. Is this merely semantic evolution, or would Plato say there is something else at work here?

²⁶ Plato, *Protagoras* 332c.

²⁷ Nehamas, "Predication and Forms," 463.

²⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 597-8.

²⁹ The only way an opposite form could be generated would be by using the law of excluded middle, namely there's a form of “bedness” and one of “non-bedness.” However, this is such a basic rule of logic that it makes the move nearly worthless in trying to describe the attributes of an object. Besides, describing something as partaking in non-bedness would lead to lots of useless descriptions. To describe a car would be to mention that it partakes of non-bedness, non-tableness, non-horseness, etc. Plato's purpose was not to use the forms to describe things *via negativa*.

³⁰ See note 29.

³¹ That we must make the distinctions using empirical evidence is supported by the statements in the *Phaedo* that we cannot encounter the forms in this life (75a-c).

³² In the edition cited the word is translated “contraries” on occasion, but since Aristotle has a more specific use of that term I will continue to use “opposites” in the body of the paper.

³³ Lloyd, *Polarity* 161.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

³⁵ Aristotle, *Categories*, 11b 15-20. Aristotle also mentions the four classes of opposites elsewhere, but his discussion in the *Categories* is the most relevant. Lloyd, *Polarity* 161.

³⁶ Aristotle, *Categories*, 6a 35-6b 35.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 11b 35.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3b 15.

³⁹ Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption* 319b 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 319b 17.

⁴¹ Aristotle, *Categories* 3b 33.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4a 10-11.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12a 26.

⁴⁴ See note 25.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Physics*, 188a 18-27.

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1045b 34 and 1046b 30.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1047b 31.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1049a 1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1049a 10.

⁵⁰ An exception are those contraries that cannot be predicated of certain things. A fire will never be cold, for example. Neither would we ever call a stone blind. Aristotle, *Categories* 12b 38, 12a 33.

⁵¹ Christos Evangelidou, *Aristotle's Categories and Porphyry* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988) 160.

⁵² Nehamas, "Predication and Forms," 461.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 469.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Categories*, 4b 14.