



Greek philosophy: Theory, praxis and human action

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The present study aims at discussing two essential concepts of philosophy in general and the Greek philosophy in particular: theory and praxis as well as their relation to human action. In so doing, it sheds light on the various transformations undergone by the traditional Greek theory from its sacred image, linked with divine truth, into practical theory which has been transformed in different degrees to human action.

The current study refers to an entanglement of the two concepts in the intellectual systems of Greek philosophers, together with how the transformation from “I think” into “I do” took place, then, it explores how a change back to “I think” occurred and dominated the Greek scene, directing human action, which reminds us of the Cartesian concept which makes the thinking ego the criterion of existence. Thus, it precedes action ontologically and temporally.

We attempt to trace the development of these two concepts since the early beginnings of the pre-Socratic philosophical thinking. Then we discuss the transformations the theory has gone through: starting with its casting away the sacredness, bestowed on it by the sophists, in order to realize the human action. Also tackled is the Socratic philosophy of action in order to show how it was a philosophy of examining and testing life. We’ll, additionally, shed light on the transformation that took place in Plato’s philosophy in his later dialogues from theory into action. Finally, the study moves on to Aristotle who gave academic definitions of the philosophical terms. By so doing, he undid entanglements, and took us back to the starting point, giving theory precedence over action since he linked it to wisdom. He

endowed theory with the best of virtues, making it a venerated goddess who directs human action

Since the very beginnings, there was entanglement of the concepts of theory and praxis in the thought systems of the Greek philosophers. Thought and theory took precedence over praxis and action at certain times, and at other times, praxis and action prevailed, and yet at other times they acquired the same status. The terms *theoria* (θεωρία) and *praxis* (πρᾶξις) have been used since the early beginnings of Greek recorded thought, and they have found their way to all languages.

*Praxis*¹ is the practice which aims at realizing a certain purpose through a certain action. The term is used to refer to the process of activity on which are based the principles of the disciplines to be applied: the practice of philosophy or the practice of politics. It is used in a manner more generally identical to practical activity, hence the expression practice as opposed to theoretical knowledge and contemplation.

Theoria (θεωρία)² is a certain supposition, or a system of ideas based on a set of principles independent of the topic of inquiry itself. Just like *praxis*, it has its Greek root with the original meaning referring to an intellectual, contemplative activity of abstract or general thinking. It also denotes the results of such thinking.

1. Pre-Socratic philosophy: establishing theory and the early beginnings of action

The pre-Socratic philosophy has been associated with inquiry concerning nature, giving the first impression that man and his action were excluded from the scope of interest. In fact, describing the pre-

1 *Praxis* is a term derived from the Greek πρᾶξις. Its infinitive is the verb πράσσω or πράττω (πράττω in the Attic dialect, and πρήσσω the Ionic); it means *to do, to act*.

2 Θεωρία: θέα thea "a view" + ὁρᾶν horan "to see"

Socratic philosophers as naturalists does not necessarily means that they were theoretical thinkers of nature alone, or that their philosophical endeavors were purely theoretical. Their inquiry was directed first to their contemporary humans, and secondly, to solving particular problems.

In the sixth century B.C., Thales converted the Greek mythological heritage into practical philosophy as he attributed the origin of the world to water. At the same time, he transformed the ancient Egyptian geometrical theories into pure geometrical theories, stripping them of their utilitarian purposes. Similarly, he transformed the Babylonian theories from religious into pure astronomical theories.

With Pythagoras, theory turned to a holy and mystic experience that is difficult for anyone to go through. Then, it temporarily shed off its holy nature with Xenophanes who argues that man is incapable of knowing the truth, and theory is a mere point of view.¹

With the mysterious philosopher Heraclitus, theory or knowledge was a privilege enjoyed only by the elite; the common people cannot know the “*logos*”; only the wise can listen to the *logos* or understand the truth latent in the concept of the reconciliation of opposites.

For Heraclitus, opposition or conflict is the human and universal action. It is the only real action, and at the same time, it is the only path to truth and knowing the harmony latent in the middle between to parties that are apparently in conflict. This is a matter known only by the wise.

Accordingly, Heraclitus believes that our concept of opposition of two parties is erroneous since each party carries within itself an element of its opposite. Thus, the role of the wise person is to discover

1 “...and of course the clear and certain truth no man has seen, nor will there be anyone who knows about the gods and what I say about all things. For even if, in the best case, one happened to speak just of what has been brought to pass, still he himself would not know. But opinion is allotted to all” (DK. B34.)

the harmony hidden behind this conflict when he rationalizes the reconciliation of opposites¹.

If, for a moment, we imagine asking Heraclitus about what he thinks of the question raised in this paper: do theory and praxis have different natures?, he might ironically answer that neither of them cannot exist without the other. Theory bears action within itself, and action bears theory within itself. He might ask us to detect the harmony that is latent in their unity.

Parmenides adds a new dimension to theory when he presents it in the form of inspiration and revelation, which Plato attributed later to a divine origin². Thus praxis and action turn to a mystic experience seeking an ultimate aim which is truth.

Theory and knowledge became even more holy with Empedocles as he presents himself as a god³ while, in his philosophy, the powers of love and strife play a reconciliatory role between theory and praxis despite being metaphysical powers⁴.

The Greek theory may have moved away temporarily from its divine form to take up its practical form with Anaxagoras who combined theory and praxis in his thought. He was followed in this by the Atomists although they attributed all human actions to the laws that govern the atoms.

With the Sophists, the ancient Greek theory took a new turn towards action, where the concept of human action was associated with the different knowledge skills which the sophists used to teach. This is why the meaning of “sophist”, which is a *sage* in Greek, was linked to a quality of an *expert* as well.

1 “οὐ ξυνιαῖσιν ὄκως διαφερόμενον ἐωυτῷ ὁμολογέει· παλίντροπος ἄρμονιή ὄκωσπερ τόξου καὶ λύρης.” (DK. B51)

2 *Laws* 719c

3 Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (VIII, 51–77)

4 DK.B 17.1–13

Despite the notoriety of the Sophists, they did philosophy a good turn by stripping the traditional Greek theory of its religious background. They argued that it was impossible to reach truth, which they were skeptical about. They also made poor arguments seem stronger than strong argument as we know from Aristotle's account of the teachings of Protagoras¹.

Finally, with sophism, philosophy focused its attention on the ethics of action: to be successful is more important than to be virtuous. Human action became more important than divine action when Protagoras made man alone the criterion of everything as Plato tells us in *Theaetetus*².

2. Socratic philosophy as an act of examining life

The philosophy of Socrates can be generally described as an act of examining, in his own words while defending himself against accusations of disrespecting the gods and corrupting the young by calling upon them to examine their acts before they decide on a course of action so that they can secure an excellent human action. When he was given a choice between death or stopping this endeavor of examining life, Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth Living"³.

The Socratic philosophy introduces a new practice of the traditional Greek theory; it presents the old divine theoretical tradition in the form of teachings which practice rationality and establish it practically on dialogue and dialectics. That is why Socrates' teachings have stayed with us up till today as an ideal of human action embodied in practicing critical thinking. They generate questions and do not give ready-made answers; define concepts and resolve ambiguity; and discuss the criteria of judgment.

1 *Rhetoric* 1402a23–5

2 *Theaetetus* 170e–171c.

3 "ὁ ... ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ", *Plato's Apology*. 38a5-6.

The Socratic philosophical praxis follows a methodology and a particular technique. This is clear in the strict discipline which controls the Socratic question. It is a methodology that necessitates dealing with all ideas with care and integrity through refuting all answers, and leading to raising more questions.

Finally, the Socratic philosophy uses the human mind as a fuse which it tries to kindle through practicing thinking, not as a hollow box to be filled with pieces of information and theory. If the human action requires the right decisions, the Socratic method secures examining all options in order to reach these decisions with the purpose of realizing an excellent human action.

3. Plato from theory to praxis

Socrates practiced philosophy and left no written record of his theory. It was Plato who reformulated Socrates' ideas and turned his teacher's praxis into a whole system of ideas which includes the criteria and methods of practicing human action. Plato used this content to establish a duality whose implications still direct philosophical thought: a duality of a static transcendental idealism and the concrete variable action.

In the Greek philosophy, Plato's name is associated with establishing theory, giving it a higher status than that of praxis; in other words, he created a duality that sets apart the world of ideas and the real world.

Theory was separated from action, raising questions about the relation between the two, and creating a need to conduct comparisons. The theory of Ideas (or the theory of Forms) is Plato's method of perceiving ideas which reflect the reality of physical objects whose origins we try to understand in order to recognize their static identity. He considers this the aim of every man of virtue. Since man belongs to the physical world, practical life becomes a precondition for living within theory. This made Plato admit that it is necessary that man

should act in order to secure what is necessary for a good life.

Both theory (ideas) and action, in Plato's thought, lay the basis for the ethical criteria in the physical world, with the *telos* (purpose) being the establishment of a utopia. At the same time, they compose the content of philosophical knowledge which can guarantee a radical reform of the political life. In criticizing the naturalist philosophers who were preoccupied with the real physical existence, Plato discussed as well the practical activity and its relation to knowledge before Aristotle. However, it is important to note that it was Aristotle who gave the precise definitions of the terms *theory* and *praxis*.

The relation between theory and action in the Platonic dialogues seems complex and entangled. When Plato is described as a theoretical philosopher who gives thought precedence over action, it transpires, on the other hand, that he frequently admits the necessity of experience and distinguishes between action and the final goal of this action. He even distinguishes between the "making" itself and the *praxis* which is aimed at—a distinction which appears later in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

In both *Euthyphro* and *Ion*, Plato explains the difference between action and the final purpose (the product) it achieves¹. This difference is also expressed in *Gorgias* where Socrates tells of the great rhetorical difference between conviction and knowledge since 'conviction' and 'knowledge' are different, because the first can be false, but not the second.²

In *Gorgias*, we read Plato's argument concerning the relation between theory and *praxis*; he says that, first of all, in political leadership and in medicine, theoretical knowledge is not sufficient, but experience is also needed³.

In the later works, there is a perceived move from theory to *praxis*, whether on the level of nature or the human ethical behavior. This is

1 *Euthyphro*, 13d & *Ion* 537c.

2 *Gorgias*, 454d.

3 *Gorgias*, 514c.

especially clear in *Timaeus* which is the only work of Plato that gives a systematic discussion of the universe coming into existence as the most beautiful of the manufactured things¹, and further describes it as a manual creative work of God the geometer of the world². The *Universe* in *Timaeus* plays the role played by the City in *The Republic*. Additionally, we can notice the similarity between the human psyche (soul) and the universal psyche. Thus, the challenge is turned from theory to human action where man's spiritual character moves in harmony with the ideal movements of the universe in order to overcome the deep-rooted defects in the human existence. At the same time, the realization of justice as action in the City is identical to the realization of the idea of justice as a theory in the world of Forms³.

4. Aristotle: from praxis to theory

As mentioned before, Aristotle was the first thinker to distinguish academically between theory and praxis when he explained the difference between a theoretical philosophy and a practical one, classifying human activities in three categories: thinking (θεωρία), making (ποίησις), and doing (praxis πράξις).

In a more detailed account, Aristotle defines his terms differentiating between the concepts of “making” or “production” (poiēsis), and the concept of “doing” (praxis), as opposed to “theory” or “contemplation” (theōria). It is a difference that may be identical to the difference between the concepts of *energeia* and *kinesis*. The first, “making”, is an activity aimed at production while the second, “praxis”, stands on its own.

Aristotle's argument concerning the concept of theory and praxis can be traced in three of his works which represent in their totality the middle and later periods of his philosophy: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Ἠθικά

1 *Timaeus*, 29a5.

2 *Ibid*, 28a6.

3 *Republic*, 580a, 588b.

Νικομάχεια; *Metaphysics*, Μετά τα Φυσικά; and *On the Soul*, Περί ψυχής¹.

The ethics in Aristotle cannot be purely theoretical, but it rather foregrounds the human action and urges practicing it. A person cannot learn the right behavior if that person has not been brought up since early childhood on good manners². We are not studying in order to know what virtue is, but to become good, for otherwise there would be no profit in it.³

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sets two bases of practical philosophy: ethics and politics which he described as disciplines related to man on the individual and social levels. The discipline of politics, he argues, is the highest degree of practical philosophy since it aims at the happiness of the society through achieving man's happiness. He, therefore, stresses the necessity of practicing ethics in order to secure excellent human and political action.

Life is classified by Aristotle into three types: a life dedicated to vulgar pleasure; a life dedicated to fame and honor; and a life dedicated to contemplation⁴. However, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, he gives theory precedence over praxis, and devotes Book X to discuss the issue in great details.

In Book VI, he divides the rational part of the psyche into two sections: the first deals with the static material; the second has for a subject the changing materials. They both have, in common, an aim which is reaching truth. Furthermore, while theory studies the principles of beings qua beings, action and practice engage in the study

1 Tracing Aristotle's works in their time sequence, the reader will notice the development of his philosophical thinking: his early writings clearly reflect the Platonic influence while the later works represent his own thinking although the specter of Plato is always looming behind.

2 NE 1095a3 and b5.

3 Ibid. II.2.

4 NE I.1095b17-19.

of the causes that are material and subject to change.

Every action or method that man performs and follows aims, argues Aristotle, at happiness εὐδαιμονία. At the same time, he sees a difference between virtue and happiness: virtue is the action through which man reaches his highest and only goal which is happiness. Aristotle argues that five paths lead to truth: art, knowledge, prudence, wisdom and mind (nous)¹. Moreover, after his classifications of the different virtues, he concludes that theoretical virtue is wisdom, and the virtue of the mind is art.

Thus, Aristotle makes a clear differentiation, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, between theoretical and practical lives, giving the first a primary role in determining human happiness. In so doing, he does not confine the meaning of happiness to wisdom gained through theoretical life, but he bestows an important role on to the virtue of prudence φρόνησι or practical wisdom, through which as well happiness is realized but at a different degree than that achieved by the theoretical life. Happiness is thus the ultimate goal, and it is not a static state but energy, a human action, and continuous praxis for the human soul.

In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle relates praxis and theory as well as the partial and the total. Human action and praxis are connected with partial experience while knowledge and theory are connected with the total. Therefore, the person who has experience is described as a practical person. Such a person has the privilege of reaching results because of his/her immediate connection with things, which is opposed to the person who establishes a total connection with things through total knowledge of them². At the same time, Aristotle asserts that both knowledge and action originate from the same source which is the physical world.

However, Aristotle brings about a comeback of the *thinking ego*

1 Ibid. 1139B 14-17.

2 Ibid. 981a 16-17.

as it was before in Plato's system of thought. It precedes and dominates the *doing ego*. He describes theoretical knowledge as wisdom in opposition to the practical knowledge which is based on experience. He gives priority to theoretical knowledge not because it is more important than practical knowledge, but rather because those who have theoretical knowledge know the cause of their subject in contrast with those who have experience since they practice without knowing the causes.

Thus, theory is given priority in the Aristotelian philosophy for two reasons: first, theory has knowledge; second, theory can be learnt.

It must be mentioned here that Aristotle does not totally exclude the importance of practice, but he tells us, at the same time, that action and praxis cannot reach the highest degree of knowledge, which is the wisdom he describes as divine and revered¹. He argues that only theoretical knowledge can reach this wisdom.

Conclusion:

The present paper has discussed the concepts of theory and praxis in the Greek philosophy, together with the duality of the transcendental ideal and the variable real. The two concepts were traced in the philosophical systems of both pre-Socratic philosophy (and how the two concepts were entangled), passing by Socrates, to show how his philosophy practiced theory in its traditional form in reality and aimed at an excellent human action. The paper has explored a transformation that took place in the Platonic philosophy from pure theory into action. Finally, we reviewed how Aristotle, the philosopher of academic knowledge who gave precise definitions of philosophical terms and organized concepts, took us back to the starting point of the Greek philosophy which connects theory/thinking with wisdom and virtue.

Finally, and according to the previous analysis, questions are raised:

1 Metaph. 983 a5.

- 1- Are theory and human action of different natures?
- 2- Did the Greek philosophy established the basis of a duality which paved the way to an attitude of disrespecting appearances and action?
- 3- Was the ancient Greek wisdom the cause behind putting philosophical thought within circles of pure knowledge analysis, leading to making “I think” of a higher status than “I do”?
- 4- Is there an undeclared agreement among the Greek philosophers to set up a barrier between the theoretical mind and the practical mind?
- 5- Again, did the Greek philosophy establish a basis for theory or thought isolated from praxis and human action, and accordingly separated from life and reality, the philosophers’ preoccupation being simply knowing the abstract truth and not practicing life, considering life not worth living unless it is a form of contemplation?
- 6- Does Karl Marx’s famous saying :The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it¹. imply an indirect accusation of the Greek philosophy?
- 7- And at last, which system is responsible for the gap between the two: is it *theoria* or *praxis*?

1 "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845), Thesis 11, *Marx Engels Selected Works*, (MESW), Vol. I, p. 15.