

## Aristotle's contribution to secularism

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### Вклад Аристотеля в развитие секуляризма

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**Abstract.** Aristotle's concept of secularism evolved in the presence of over 30.000 gods, and was contradicted by traditional human explanation of the world as a divine creation. In contrast, he argued that "nature was mysterious but not divine." Aristotle viewed religion as a false sign in the light of his own theory of science.

As a physician, Aristotle regarded religion as a conceptual malaise whose etiology lays in ignorance and obscurantism, a dogma contradicting human intellect and preventing exploration of cosmos. He confronted ethos of his time with the logic of his classification of science and their not so visible semiosis, deserving interpretation rather than divine intervention.

**Keywords:** secular, religious, obscurantism, divine, human, cosmos, intellect, reason.

**Резюме.** Концепция секуляризма Аристотеля развивалась в условиях наличия более 30.000 богов и противоречила традиционному человеческому объяснению мира как божественного творения. В противовес этому он утверждал, что «природа таинственна, но не божественна». Аристотель рассматривал религию как ложный знак в свете своей собственной теории науки. Как врач, Аристотель рассматривал религию как концептуальное недомогание, этиология которого кроется в невежестве и мракобесии, как догму, противоречащую человеческому разуму и препятствующую исследованию космоса. Он противопоставил этосу своего времени логику своей классификации наук и их не очень заметный семиозис, заслуживающий скорее интерпретации, чем божественного вмешательства.

**Ключевые слова:** светское, религиозное, мракобесие, божественное, человек, космос, интеллект, разум.

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3. Религия как ложный знак
4. Цель жизни – стать цивилизованным и построить идеальное общество

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### **1. Aristotle's Stand on the Cult of the Divine**

The towering figure of Aristotle (384–322 BC) still exudes impressive authority on many subjects even in our modern age of scientific and technological discoveries and the overall wide knowledge about all phenomena, human beings and Cosmos. Aristotle could still be our mentor and provide a much needed therapy for the still confused and puzzled modernity. His wisdom is still a navigating compass for the lost modern humanity that still cannot solve so many existential problems nearly 2.000 years after. So many phenomena appear to be still unresolved, particularly in the realm of religion. Paradoxically, despite the enormous accumulation of knowledge, modern humanity faces in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the global “religious Renaissance” and is uncertain about the place of religion in modern society. Nearly two thousand years ago, Aristotle, facing a primitive ancient science and living amidst the confused best minds of antiquity, still managed to clear the analytical space from what he regarded as obscurantist doctrines of many of his contemporaries and free Reason from the tyrannical hold of religion which posed an obstacle to further inquiry, blocking human pathway to civilization. He was not though a pioneer in the battle against Belief – a century before him, a pagan Greek martyr Protagoras (483–410 BC) had been banished from Athens, and his books were publicly burnt. All happened due to his refusal to accept the divine origins of the Universe, a prevailing ideology of the Greek society of the day. Protagoras held these blasphemous views in the presence of 30.000 gods, invented and worshiped by his contemporaries. He used to state publicly, ” I am unable to arrive at a knowledge whether there are any gods” [1984:231]. But his contemporaries and people in power could not accept his blasphemous idea since gods had been at the root of their collective consciousness and the foundation of their culture. Not all Greek intellectuals unanimously condemned Protagoras. Aristotle not only embraced his blasphemous world view, but he also provided a solid analytical base for his anti-cosmology.

In his immortal *Metaphysics*, Aristotle stated that “all men desire understanding” and therefore cannot rely on the tyrannical dogma which the ancient Greek society wished to lock its populace and

humanity in [1966:12]. The mysterious universe around man demanded free inquiry and uninhibited investigation which only the anti-divine cosmology could provide. Aristotle defended the natural human right to know while accepting that “some people believe in the existence of gods,” but wise men, in his view, “should be allowed not to believe” [1984, vol. I:450]. Aristotle defined the academic and human freedom even in the absence of academic institutions. He condemned blind belief, blind submission to the dogmatic unquestioning majority and docility of the “small men,” using the term of Confucius. The respect for Man and his unique intelligence sustained Aristotle’s personal stand against the dogmatic traditions and collective worship of the divine, holding back human inquiry and blocking human advancement.

## 2. Analytical Platform on Secularism

We mentioned earlier that Aristotle’s concept of Secularism had evolved in the presence of the grand divine pantheon of nearly 30.000 gods which posed a rather impressive edifice of theological plurality. Unlike the defiant and outspoken Protagoras, who doubted the religious mythology without engaging society into a rigorous debate, nor providing solid causal arguments, Aristotle took a different route – he developed his own consistent analytical platform which could not be easily dismissed. He came to it via the seldom acknowledged even today, his own semiotic theory. In his rarely quoted lines from the memorable *Rhetoric to Alexander*, one finds, “One sign causes belief, another knowledge,” [1984, vol.2:2287]. This succinct statement has given the entire posterity the ready formula of sign production of all cultural signs, including science, philosophy, art, economics, i.e. the entire edifice of human Culture.

Aristotle’s semiotic theory which would be the foundation for the understanding the way human imagination constructs and apprehends reality, dissecting the world and leading human Reason on the pathway of cognition. There is not a single area of human activity that does not obey this universal dichotomy – the real and imaginary, fact and fiction, knowledge and mere belief. The idea of falsehood of the religious representation of the world or the religious dogma came out of this nearly mathematical conceptual base. The idea of the belief-producing sign elegantly summarized all misconceptions man may be led to, be it science, politics or religion, including the harmful reductionist religious myth, falsely explaining the mysterious Cosmos and human existence within it. Aristotle, a physician treated religion as a conceptual malaise whose etiology lay in ignorance and obscurantism, standing in a way to human knowledge and exploration of cosmos, constraining human intellect and the innate desire to know. He confronted the predominant cultural ethos of his time with the logic of his invincible semiosis and his classification of signs.

### 3. Religion as a False Sign

In the remote antiquity, Aristotle developed his semiotic theory which would await two millennia to be recognized as a separate cognitive tool and universally applicable sphere of human activity. Aristotle subtly denounced religion as a False sign that people were free to invent on their own will individually and collectively, but also are entitled to disregard it, taking into account the human multifaceted activity and solid proof of the independent human creative power and intelligence. Arguing for Secularism and free inquiry, Aristotle appealed to the collective Reason of the “ancient modernity”, i.e. to his contemporaries whom he was asking to see the gap between the primitive stage of humanity prior to 400 BC and after. Aristotle engages his contemporaries into the historical gaze and invites them to analyze their own achievements versus their primitive past. He wrote in his essay *On the Heavens*, “The ancients gave the gods the heaven or the upper place” [1984, vol. I:470]. Here, he asks his readership to see the difference between the false antiquated perceptions, the view of the world, imagined by the primitive uncivilized ancestors, i.e. those long before 350–380 BC and that of his contemporaries. Aristotle charts a map of the Secular human advancement through the ages, appealing to the ego of his contemporaries whom he invites to embark on the passage towards the civilization of new ideas, new wisdom and new vision of the world, void of the divine. He wrote the following related to the topic in his treatise “*On the Universe*”:

The old explanations, which we have inherited from our fathers, is that all things are from God and were framed by God [1984, vol. I:635].

Unhappy with the “world of the fathers, constructed and wrongfully imagined for their sons, Aristotle invites the audience to question their authority, arguing that “Nature is mysterious, though not divine” (*On Divination in Sleep* [1984, vol. I:737]). Aware of the general pro-religious intellectual climate, ostracism and the persecution of the deniers of religion, like Protagoras, Aristotle is very subtle in his definition and critique of religion, presenting it as an obscurantist idea of the fathers, the legacy of the cultural past which needs to be revised and abandoned in the name of human advancement, the forceful movement towards the pathway of knowledge and true civilization, rather than clinging to the False Sign. Being critical of the cultural past, “the world of the fathers”, Aristotle still regards it as an unavoidable primary, pre-civilizational phase. As a physician, Aristotle sees the “therapeutical effect and need” of the ancient rituals. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle alluded to the ancient worship “as form of ordinary natural conviviality,” providing pleasant relaxations in the form of appeasing gods, a diversion from hard labor of the primitive man and his general precarious conditions, having written in his *Eudemian Ethics* the following:

Man desires society of another man  
as a social animal, not god who cannot be  
a friend [1984, vol. II:62].

The common religious rituals satisfied human natural impulse to share beliefs and traditions, to sustain similar thoughts and even false conceptions out of the spirit of solidarity. Any protest or deviation from the shared opinions was endangering the loss of the convivial spirit. Aristotle launches the age of the ancient enlightenment when Man, in his view, did not need God and this idea is behind his statement in *Magna Moralia* that:

Man is born to live first and love things in life,  
but not have love towards the invisible Gods [1984, vol. II:1913].

This is Aristotle's message to all faithful to God and believers in the divine commands, to the future religious fanatics, who misinterpret the role of man, undermine his wisdom and power, and totally rely on the divine.

Observing the excessive decorum and opulence of the religious rituals and worship in his own time, Aristotle dismissed it also as an expression of class distinction "Poor man has no means to be magnificent," he would write, stating this in *Nicomachean Ethics* [1984, vol. II:1772]. As he knew, only wealthy could provide the elaborate symbolic honoring of gods, build temples, engage in pompous ceremonies. It is from this Aristotelian premise there would eventually arise the proverbial modern Marxist definition of religion as "the opium of the people." Aristotle did not produce a single whole treatise with the anti-religious messages, but they are wisely and purposefully scattered through the entire corpus of his works. One finds his *Doctrine of Secularism* while reading in between the lines of his essays: *On Heaven, Magna Moralia, Nicomachean Ethics, On the Universe and Eudemian Ethics*, etc. The goal of human inquiry, according to Aristotle, should be "knowing oneself", but not God, and learning about the world around and human Being in world, relying on one's own wisdom and becoming truly civilized.

#### **4. The Goal of Being to Become Civilized and Building Ideal Society**

Throughout his entire intellectual career, Aristotle was preoccupied with elevating Man, his wisdom, making man truly civilized and building ideal human society. One hundred years after Confucius, in remote Greece, unaware of the distant China and its civilization, Aristotle developed a completely analogous teaching that would reaffirm his own concept of Cultural Universals. Aristotle started as a physician, a healer of the physical body, an observer of nature, or natural signs, and ended as a critic of Culture and cultural signs produced by men. Aristotle, the student of Nature and decoder of the

natural signs, antedates Aristotle, the grand thinker and philosopher, who developed the doctrine of human ascent and creator of the truly civilized society. From biology and medicine to logic, ethics, sociology, history – this is the trajectory of Aristotle’s studies and his interests about Man and his world, Nature versus Culture, all biological species versus human species, and ultimately unique position of Man, the creator of unique civilization.

Prior to pondering over the ways of making man perfect and leading him towards the civilized pathway, Aristotle turned to the comparative analysis of all species. He concluded that only man, man alone possessed memory, speech and inventive creative imagination that led him to the production of what we know as Culture. His comparative analysis brought Aristotle to a conclusion that Man was a wonderful unique creature, capable independently, without the divine intervention, to produce signs of his own – Culture, a unique endowment and special treasure of humanity. This conclusion was profoundly tied to the influence of Secularism, the fundamental result of human cultural evolution. In the entire natural kingdom, Man alone proved to be able to compartmentalize one’s activities, separating one’s biological functions from the intellectual interests, and by doing so, removing Eros from the center of human existence. Man alone proved to be capable of inventing the sexual politics and making the monogamous family the precondition of civilization. The moral and sexual taboos gradually and consequently invented by Man secured human ascent to the Civilized mode of existence. Language enabled man to think logically, communicate one’s thoughts and feelings, create epos, verbal art, literature, philosophy, science etc. The innate aesthetic impulse led to the improvement of the physical environment and architecture, that carried both beauty and comfort, and safety. Possessing memory enabled Man to recall at Will and to pass the knowledge to the next generation. Being related to nature and other natural species, still Man managed to separate oneself from them by creating one’s own signs without the divine intervention, becoming a producer of Culture and cultural semiosphere, of one’s own making, and secondary to the natural one.

As a believer in the power of human Reason, Aristotle defended the purpose of Being in the world, aiming at building genuine civilization, a unique form of existence, with, but not solely with Nature, the novel model of Being, not overrun by biology. Much like to Confucius, family, monogamous family, appeared to Aristotle to be the marker of the genuine civilized society and the first significant step on the road to civilization, with sexuality at the safe periphery of Being, with the tamed Eros, and turning to the building block of civilized ethics. Aristotle tied it to the art of human “continence,” or control of one’s passions and instincts, and being, in his mind, the marker of civilized Man or “gentleman”, in the definition of Confucius. In his *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle explains what “moral excellence” means, how to become civilized, and not enslaved by one’s desires. The most negative

triad of human qualities, according to him, was the inability to control wish, anger and sensual appetite [1984, vol. II:1937]. Millennia later, modern thinkers, like Rousseau, Nietzsche and Freud, would demolish this Aristotelian concept of civilized man and society, independently re-affirmed by the Doctrine by Confucius a hundred years earlier, and bringing the untamed Eros into the center of the civilized space.

Much like Confucius in the remote China, a century earlier, Aristotle also placed great significance on education and development of human Reason. “To be educated is to be able to form a fair judgement,” he wrote in his *Parts of Animals* [1984, vol. II:1864]. In Aristotle’s estimation, education, equal for both sexes, predetermined the level of civilized society and was regarded to be indispensable for making man civilized. Much like Confucius, Aristotle supported the idea of innate differences in their intellectual abilities to acquire knowledge, and that these exceptional qualities predetermine human ability to become rulers. Aristotle did not think that all people are equally intelligent, nor that all are capable of leading the masses, which, in his view, “are quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts,” he wrote in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, [1984, vol. II:1731). The beasts, or the uncultivated majority, according to Aristotle, are indeed analogous to children, the same idea was expressed in the Confucian ethics and doctrine of social politics. The ruler, in the Chinese collective thinking, had to be educated, aiming at the popularization of knowledge, leading the uneducated masses whom Confucius also likened to children.

Aristotle was the product of urban civilization while Confucius of the rural one, yet despite these differences, both thinkers independently developed identical concepts of what constitutes perfect civilized man and society. The proper, perfect, wise and cultivated man of Confucius is analogous to Aristotle’s civilized Man. Both are products of the Secular thinking, neither Confucius, nor Aristotle, connect their ideas to the traditional antiquated religious worship. Their men-signs are the products of the Secular educated thinking. Neither temple, church, nor religious authorities have place in their doctrines of ideal civilized society. Their civilized man, called “proper” or “gentleman” by Confucius, is a product of one’s civilized environment. It is not the fear of God’s or the divine punishment that motivates Aristotelian civilized man and his ascent to civilization but his Reason.

For millennia, the Judeo-Christian theology, appreciative of Aristotle’s wisdom, tried to appropriate powerful Aristotle’s Secular discourse for the support and promotion of their own ideology, mythology and inculcation of faith. They erroneously interpreted Aristotle’s NOUS/INTELLIGENCE as a divine supreme judgement. Aristotle’s secular wisdom could not be ignored, the power of his arguments too impressive to be discarded and his secular vision of the world

had been appropriated by the servants of the Church, who misinterpreted this ancient secular thinker for the promotion of Christianity and its societal need. His notions of morality and ethics were suitable for appropriation by the religious circles. Yet, the Aristotelian arguments in the realm of morality and ethics were far superior in their strength and logic, and the overall intellectual appeal than the religious dogmatism, predating the Judeo-Christian morality by millennia.

The Aristotelian notion of moral excellence or his moral code of civilized human conduct is tied to his Doctrine of Civilized man, shaped by education, acquisition of knowledge and the overall cultivation of Mind in the free secular manner. This Secular being is the product of the conscious “continence”, control of passions, overcoming the instincts of the proto-human behavior, more suitable for a brute. It was axiomatic for Aristotle that civilized man was faithful in his monogamous family. This idea was more akin to the Sumerian forgotten ancient ethics, pre-dating the Semitic, Assyro-Babylonian pre-Biblical narrative. Aristotle constructed a secular narrative as a code of civilized behavior to be re-discovered by the Church millennia later. He articulated it in his *Politics*:

As to adultery, let it be held disgraceful in general,  
for any man or woman to be found in any way unfaithful  
when they are married, or called husband and wife [1984, vol. II:2129].

Finding adultery overall disgraceful and objectionable in civilized society, Aristotle condemns it particularly strongly children are involved or expected to be born:

If during the time of being children anything  
of the sort occurs, let the guilty person be  
punished with the loss of privileges in proportion  
to the offence [*Politics*, 1984, vol. II: 2119].

This Secular Commandment by Aristotle, written in ancient Greece, is more than relevant to the post-modernity which has completely lost its moral compass, including the Judeo-Christian ethics, unaware of the ancient secular version. In respect to the loose sexual politics of the post-moderns, Aristotle would not regard most of the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries civilized. Paradoxically, a 4<sup>th</sup> century Hellenistic thinker could pass a strong moral judgement on the post-Judeo-Christian generation of the confused about mores and morals whose conduct leaves much to be desired. Aristotle’s system of the Secular thought and his views on morality overturn the traditional bias that only the religious institutions, guided by God and his commandments, have the authority and could dictate proper human conduct. Aristotle proves that one does not need God, nor the Church, synagogue to be moral and oversee proper behavior. Aristotle’s concept of civilized society founded on a Secular base would be materialized in the some of the future modern societies.



Aristotle borrowed the idea of a Secular proto-socialist state from Phaleas (circa 4<sup>th</sup> BC), who was the first to affirm that “citizens ought to share possessions, enjoy subsidized art as on Crete, colonized by the Phoenicians at some time [*Politics*, B.III in 1984, vol. II:2009;2022]. Relying on Solon (630–560 BC), Aristotle argued that “no bound to riches has been fixed for man,” maintaining that the goals of getting wealth constitute some sort of vice, depriving man from being truly civilized. The nothing in excess-idea is a part of Aristotle’s conduct which would appear unpalatable to many members of modern industrial societies as much as to many of his contemporaries in antiquity. Aristotle’s social prescription and certainty of his Secular Commandments, aiming at squeezing a barbarian out of oneself, contradict many modern and post-modern ways of Being in the capitalist economic setup, with the cult of excess and wealth, and limited appreciation of education, culture and spiritual values. Aristotle’s nothing -in excess formula, one of the fundamentals of his system, is at odds with the exploitation of the animalistic instincts and the idea of moral modern practice of exploiting the instincts, the biological in humans.

However, his Secular Commandments were in tune with the future Christian ideology of poverty and humility, and equal distribution of wealth in a society, ready to accept the afterlife universe. Aristotle’s definition of the soul would be picked up by the future theologians and the Church fathers who, paradoxically, needed his more sophisticated secular exegesis to turn people into believers. The spiritual would be borrowed from Aristotle’s system. The soul, the product of Reason, the source of complicated inner life and supported by the scientific explanation of mental and physical origin, presented a more attractive and useful argument than just the mere divine symbolism to be accepted at its face value. The religious mythology of the future would gain its force from the secular doctrine of antiquity, with Aristotle’s arguments having provided a more convincing and solid ground and having empowered the Church.

Separated by time, distance, language and independently from each other, Confucius in China and Aristotle in Greece, both had developed similar Secular Doctrines of Being, the forms of civilized existence, based on human cultural evolution and advancement. Their Secular conception of the ideal civilized society confirmed the universality of human development and secular existence as the ultimate goal of all societies. Their idea of making man civilized via education, transmission of knowledge rather than the dogmatic religious mythology, reaffirmed the universality of the ultimate existential goals of humanity and power of Man to organize one’s being independently from religion and the divine mythology. The two thinkers shared the same ethical and moral norms, placing high emphasis on human self-perfection, self-command, duty and responsibility. Both doctrines reaffirmed Aristotle’s idea of Cultural Universals. Both Confucius and Aristotle placed Man on high pedestal

due to the paramount recognition of Reason and unique human power to think creatively and rationally, the ability to act morally and sensibly, relying on one's intellect. Both thinkers advocated justice and moderation in all spheres of life and the ability to construct one's existence without the divine help. The Secular underlying principle of both existential theories makes them powerful guides of humanity on the pathway to the proper, ideal civilized society. The perfect gentleman, educated man of Confucius is identical to the existential construct of Aristotle's doctrine of civilized man, a paragon of otherness versus the multitude of the ordinary, "small men" and other biological species, against whom Man stands out with his powerful Reason. In the mind of these two outstanding thinkers, the goal of human existence lies in the persistent advancement, continuous successful cultivation of Reason and elevation above one's biological origins [A Makolkin, 2015:35].

Both Confucianism and Aristotelianism would find their ideological and conceptual continuum in the future Marxism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the former USSR and Communist China, and some Northern para-socialist European countries with the best educational systems where their Secular existential theories would be put into practice. The religion there would be placed on the margins of society, tolerated as an individual belief, and the Secular laws, values, and Secularism were given paramount significance, and Church and religion were preserved strictly as items of cultural memory, a relic of the past rather than a governing institution. The history of these modern secular societies is testimony to the possibility to Be, to exist according to the human design, contract, without the divine prescription and the watchful eye of the church. In fact, the moral code in these secular societies has been far superior to those where Church and religion were given primacy and power to dictate the existential norms.

Secularism does not imply total abandonment of the tradition, of all the taboos worked out worked out over millennia and implemented in social life in order to make man civilized. It simply means to live by the civilized laws and norms without the Fear of punishment by God, but rather out of fear of plunging into the abyss of barbarism and recourse to the animal-like existence. The modern confused man can still benefit from the wisdom therapy of the ancient sages, from those who knew what was the proper way to Be, to be human and civilized.

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