

# Introduction to Aristotle

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Aristotle was born of a well-to-do family in the Macedonian town of Stagira in 384 B.C. His father, Nicomachus, was a physician to the king of Macedonia who died when Aristotle was young. In 367, when Aristotle was seventeen, his uncle, Proxenus, sent him to Athens to study at Plato's Academy. There he remained, first as a pupil, later as an associate, for the next twenty years.

When Plato died in 347, the Academy came under the control of his nephew Speusippus, who favored mathematical aspects of Platonism that Aristotle, who was more interested in biology, found uncongenial. Perhaps for this reason, or perhaps because he felt he should have become head of the Academy himself - but even more likely because of growing anti-Macedonian sentiment in Athens - Aristotle decided to leave. He accepted the invitation of Hermeias, his friend and a former fellow student in the Academy, to join his philosophical circle on the coast of Asia Minor in Assos, where Hermeias (a former slave) had become ruler. Aristotle remained there for three years. During this period he married Hermeias's niece, Pythias, with whom he had a daughter, also named Pythias.

In 345, Aristotle moved to Mytilene, on the nearby island of Lesbos, where he joined another former Academic, Theophrastus, who was a native of the island. Theophrastus, at first Aristotle's pupil and then his closest colleague, remained associated with him until Aristotle's death. While they were on Lesbos the biological research of Aristotle and Theophrastus flourished. In 343, Philip of Macedon invited Aristotle to his court to serve as tutor to his son Alexander, then thirteen years old. What instruction Aristotle gave to the young man who was to become Alexander the Great is not known, but it seems likely that Aristotle's own interest in politics increased during his stay at the Macedonian court. In 340 Alexander was appointed regent for his father and his studies with Aristotle ended.

The events of the next five years are uncertain. Perhaps Aristotle stayed at the court; perhaps he went back to Stagira. But in 335, after the death of Philip, he returned to Athens for his second long sojourn. Just outside the city he rented some buildings and established his own school, the Lyceum, where he lectured, wrote, and discussed philosophy with his pupils and associates. Because much of the discussion in his school took place while teachers and students were walking about the Lyceum grounds, Aristotle's school came to be known as the Peripatetic ("walking" or "strolling") school. Under his direction, they carried out research on biological and other philosophical and scientific topics. Theophrastus worked on botany, Aristoxenus on music; Eudemus wrote a history of mathematics and astronomy, Meno of medicine, and Theophrastus of physics, cosmology, and psychology. In addition, Aristotle and his group produced a monumental account of the constitutions of 158 Greek city-states - an account Aristotle draws on in his own *Politics*.

While he was in Athens, Aristotle's wife Pythias died. He subsequently began a union with

a woman named Herpyllis, like Aristotle a native of Stagira. Although they apparently never married, they had a son, whom they named Nicomachus, after Aristotle's father.

Aristotle's work during his twelve or thirteen years at the Lyceum was prodigious. Most of his surviving works were probably written during this period. But when Alexander died in 323, Athens once again became a hostile environment for a Macedonian, and Aristotle was accused of impiety (the same charge that had been leveled against both Anaxagoras and Socrates). Leaving the Lyceum in the hands of Theophrastus, Aristotle fled northward to Euboea; he is said to have remarked that he would "not allow the Athenians to sin twice against philosophy." Removed from the cultural center of Athens, he lamented his isolation, but continued his biological studies. He died in 322 at the age of sixty-two from an ulcer or cancer of the stomach.

That is the known history of Aristotle. There has always been speculation about how this brilliant philosopher might have furthered the cause of Alexander the Great in Athens, a major opponent of Philip and Alexander. Intrigue abounded. Demosthenes, the leader of the anti-Macedonian faction in Athens, accepted gold from the Persians to finance the Greek resistance to Alexander. Did Aristotle serve as a similar conduit for Macedonian gold and influence. Remember that many scholars believe the charge of impiety was lodged against Socrates to settle old political scores, could the same thing have happened to Aristotle?

Of Aristotle's writings, only about one fifth to one quarter have survived. Still, the great variety of subjects that they cover provides a good indication of the range and depth of his interests. The notorious difficulty these writings pose for the contemporary reader is in part explained by the nature of the works themselves. Far from being polished pieces of prose intended for publication, they are for the most part working papers and lecture notes, terse and compressed often to the point of unintelligibility. (Ancient sources tell us that in his published works - now lost - Aristotle displayed an exemplary literary style, and there are occasional glimpses of it in the surviving works. Actually, we are lucky to have any writing at all from Aristotle. What we have today were tracked down in a cellar two hundred years after Aristotle's death by a Roman antique collector. )

Aristotle was above all driven by a desire for knowledge and understanding in every possible realm. His works are teeming with detailed observations about the natural world as well as abstract speculations of the most general sort. As both a scientist and a philosopher, Aristotle could easily make the transition from describing the feeding behavior of eels and limpets to theorizing about the divine intellect that is the uncaused cause of everything else in the universe. But his philosophical and scientific interests are rooted in the natural world - about one quarter of the surviving works deal with topics in biology. This he combined with an unshakeable confidence in the ability of the human mind, aided by the system of deductive logic he invented and by close and detailed observation of natural phenomena, to comprehend the fundamental nature of objective reality.

Aristotle did not suppose that he was the first person to attempt this task. He was a keen student of the writings of his scientific and philosophical predecessors. The influence of Plato's thought is apparent throughout Aristotle's works, even where he disagrees with his teacher most. He pays a great deal of attention to the Presocratics, seldom agreeing with them, but often crediting them with important (albeit usually partial) insights. His typical approach to a subject

is to review its history and then, making what use he can of the received opinions, to set out his own account. Often his position is a kind of compromise that incorporates the best features while avoiding the excesses of rival schemes that are too extreme.

Aristotle's works were lost again in the West after the decline of Rome. During the 9th century AD, Arab scholars introduced Aristotle, in Arabic translation, to the Islamic world. The 12th-century Spanish-Arab philosopher Averroes is the best known of the Arabic scholars who studied and commented on Aristotle. In the 13th century, the Latin West renewed its interest in Aristotle's work, and Saint Thomas Aquinas found in it a philosophical foundation for Christian thought. Church officials at first questioned Aquinas's use of Aristotle; in the early stages of its rediscovery, Aristotle's philosophy was regarded with some suspicion, largely because his teachings were thought to lead to a materialistic view of the world. Nevertheless, the work of Aquinas was accepted, and the later philosophy of scholasticism continued the philosophical tradition based on Aquinas's adaptation of Aristotelian thought.

The influence of Aristotle's philosophy has been pervasive; it has even helped to shape modern language and common sense. His doctrine of the Prime Mover as final cause played an important role in theology. Until the 20th century, logic meant Aristotle's logic. Until the Renaissance, and even later, astronomers and poets alike admired his concept of the universe. Zoology rested on Aristotle's work until British scientist Charles Darwin modified the doctrine of the changelessness of species in the 19th century. In the 20th century a new appreciation has developed of Aristotle's method and its relevance to education, literary criticism, the analysis of human action, and political analysis. Not only the discipline of zoology, but also the world of learning as a whole, seems to amply justify Darwin's remark that the intellectual heroes of his own time "were mere schoolboys compared to old Aristotle