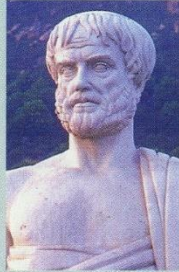


## ARISTOTLE

Read these couple of pages and then answer the questions at the end.



## Aristotle

● 384–322 BCE 🇬🇷 Greece

The sheer range of Aristotle's work is staggering, and the subject divisions and names he deployed have endured to this day: ethics, logic, metaphysics, meteorology, physics, economics, and psychology. For more than 2,000 years, his influence on European thought has been profound.

### LIFE AND WORKS

Aristotle was born in Stageira, northern Greece. He had connections with the royal family of Macedonia, his father acting as physician to King Philip. His parents died when he was young and at the age of 17 Aristotle was sent to Athens to study at Plato's Academy. There he remained for 20 years as student and teacher until Plato's death. But he was passed over as the next head of the Academy, possibly because of his opposition to certain Platonic doctrines, and left Athens. In 343 BCE he accepted an invitation to become tutor to the King's son, Alexander. After Philip's death, Aristotle returned to Athens, now aged 49, and set up his own school – the

Lyceum (also known as the Peripatetic School, because of Aristotle's preference for pacing up and down when discussing philosophical problems). However, like Socrates before him he was charged with impiety, in 323 BCE, and rather than allow the Athenians to "sin twice against philosophy" he escaped, only to die a year later of a stomach complaint. The story that he died by throwing himself into the sea because he could not explain the tides is probably apocryphal. The extent of Aristotle's influence on Alexander has caused much conjecture, but his former pupil's many conquests and the library in Alexandria ensured the enduring legacy of Aristotle's ideas.

**Aristotle tutored Alexander** the Great as a boy, and in time his ideas spread and endured across an empire that stretched to the Indian Ocean.

**ESSENTIAL TEXTS** *Metaphysics*; *Nicomachean Ethics*; *Politics*; *On the Soul*.





## KEY IDEAS

Aristotle was deeply influenced by Plato but was suspicious of the otherworldly elements in his teacher's thinking, and in particular the view that knowledge of the world cannot be accessed via the senses. The trajectory he pursued on leaving Plato's Academy is far more empirically minded and values the piecemeal investigations of the scientist.

Knowledge, for Aristotle, is not a simple matter of disinterested speculation, but involves getting one's hands dirty.

Where Plato saw mathematics as the paradigm for knowledge, Aristotle saw the importance of observation of the bewildering variety of phenomena in this world. His critique of Platonism



this is organized. Different oak trees are the same not because they are made of the same substance, or (contrary to Plato) because they resemble the "Form" of the oak, but because they share a common structure. Inanimate objects similarly take a form that determines their characteristic activity or usage. For example, the organization of the parts of an axe determines what it is in terms of its function: to chop wood. Defining things in terms of their purpose

makes Aristotle's theory of substances "teleological". He saw everything in the universe as definable in this way.

Aristotle's notion of form also led him to disagree with Plato on the nature of human beings. He did

# "EVERY REALM OF NATURE IS MARVELLOUS."

*Parts of Animals 645a*

also points out that knowledge must be grounded on what it is possible to experience, and thus the starting point for philosophy must be the senses. If we start to speculate on what lies beyond our experience we stray into mysticism.

## WHAT IS EXISTENCE?

Aristotle was interested in the question of "being": of what kinds of things there are, and what it is for something to exist. His concern with this world inevitably drove him to take issue with Plato's Theory of Forms (see pp.76–81) – the view that a world of universals exists independently of particular things. Aristotle reckoned that universals have no existence beyond the many exemplars we see around us. So, there is no such thing as the ideal oak tree, distinct from those growing around us. Things or "substances" are comprised not just of brute physical matter, but also of the form that it takes. What makes a plant or animal what it is is not the material stuff from which it is composed, but the way

not see our essence as a substance distinct from our physical bodies. So the idea of the self persisting after the body has gone is nonsensical.

## ETHICS AND POLITICS

Aristotle views us as primarily social beings and government as there to help us achieve a good life within society. As its role is to facilitate rather than dictate, he rejects the idea of Plato's state run by philosophers, believing that a democracy is more likely to achieve this goal. Humans strive for wellbeing and the means to achieve this is to live virtuously and engage in intellectual contemplation. Aristotle offers practical guidance in how to live the good life, identifying the virtues we should pursue for human wellbeing as lying between two extremes of vice – generosity, for example, being the "golden mean" between the two extremes of meanness and extravagance, and so on.

**SEE ALSO** ▶ Plato (pp.244–7) • Plato and the Forms (pp.76–81) • Dualism of mind and body (pp.124–7)

**Questions on Aristotle:**

1. Make a brief note of any biographical information – where he lived, when, who influenced Aristotle etc.
2. Aristotle disagreed with Plato in that Aristotle thought you could only know about what you could sense (empirical evidence). Do you agree?
3. Aristotle was very interested in what things are made of. He argued that humans are physical beings and there is no 'soul' that exists beyond death. What do you think?
4. Aristotle believed that we should all try to live a good life and the way to do this is to be a good person as you can, and to use your brain. You could ask, what does it mean to be a good person? For Aristotle it meant living by the "golden mean" or the middle path between extremes. Find out more about what Aristotle meant by the "golden mean".

See also:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csIW4W\\_DYX4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csIW4W_DYX4)