

## ***Aristotle: Introductory Lecture***

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1. Aristotle's Life in Historical Context: 384-322 BCE
2. Aristotle's "System"

### 1. Aristotle's Life in Historical Context

Like most ancient philosophers, we don't know much about the details of A's life, although we do know the dates of major changes in his life and can speculate about the effects of his cultural climate on his thought.

To fill in a little biographical detail we've left implicit in discussing Socrates and Plato:

Socrates (@470-399) was a young man in the heyday of 5th century Athens, born 10 years after Salamis and the defeat of the Persians. When he was ten, Pericles brought in his democratic reforms, which allowed him, a mason/sculptor by trade, a much greater role in public life. The grand days of empire began, lasting for thirty years, until the Peloponnesian troubles began in 430. During this time of Athenian prosperity, sophistic investigations flourished; Socrates benefitted from the overall prosperity of his friends and developed his own philosophic practice. For the last thirty years of his life, Athens suffered the long war, plague, tyranny, defeat, tyranny and a reign of terror, and finally civil war. Socrates was a victim then of democratic house-cleaning after the defeat of the Thirty.

Plato (428-347) spent his youth in the midst of the long war, following Socrates until the latter's death. A member of a rich and noble family, his aristocratic attraction to Spartan discipline were no doubt strengthened by the fact that the democrats both drove Athens to empire and eventual defeat, but also killed Socrates. The turmoil of Athens in the last part of the 5th century, during his youth, must then have profoundly affected his later writings, as we can see a marked preference for stability over turbulence in his view of both cosmos and polis, even though he wrote in the comparative normalcy of the 4th century.

Aristotle (384-322) was different from Socrates and Plato in many respects. He was entirely a child of the 4th century; he was Macedonian, not Athenian, although he lived and worked as a foreigner in Athens for many years; he was upper middle-class, rather than an artisan like Socrates or an aristocrat like Plato.

- 1) His father was court physician to the king of Macedonia, in northern Greece.
- 2) At age 17 (367) he moved to Athens to study, quickly gravitating to Plato and the Academy, his group of fellow philosophers. Plato was 60 years old, at his philosophic peak, writing the "middle dialogues" at this time. Aristotle's young adulthood, the next 20 years, until he was 37, were spent in the Academy.
- 3) On Plato's death at 80 in 347, Aristotle left Athens, presumably from anti-Macedonian feelings, led by Demosthenes. He wandered about the Ionian world for a few years, probably doing empirical biological research.
- 4) He was then called to tutor Alexander the Great for 8 years, most likely in Homer, as any young noble would have been. Whatever he taught him, it wasn't Plato, as Big Al was interested in glory and empire, not in being a philosopher-king.
- 5) In 335, when Aristotle was 49, he moved back to Athens to found his own school, the Lyceum. The next 12 years were his peak.
- 6) At the death of Alexander the Great in 322, Aristotle felt the Athens would be free to express resentment at Macedonians, and so he left Athens "so it would not sin a second time against philosophy." He moved then for safety, but did not last a year.

Although it's not a precise endeavor at all, we can locate some correlations between these biographical facts and Aristotle's interests. As the son of a physician, he was more biologically inclined than the geometrically

inclined Plato. As a foreigner, he was less interested in Athenian politics than in politics in general, and less interested in politics than in science as a whole. As middle class, he was less opposed to democracy than the aristocratic Plato, although he certainly wasn't democratic *per se*. And perhaps as a middle-class foreign biologist, he was interested in "the mean"--not the mediocre or the average, but the avoidance of extremes that allows flourishing health.

## 2. Aristotle's "System"

### Logic

Preliminary analyses, prior to any science, into language, meaning, and knowledge.  
(*Categories, Prior Analytics, Posterior Analytics, Topics, Sophistical Refutations*)

### Science

Theoretical	Practical	Productive
First Philosophy	Political Science	Artistic production
Mathematics	Ethics	Rhetorical production
Physics		
Cosmology		
Biology (includes "Psychology")		

Theoretical Sciences seek knowledge for its own sake of the principles and causes of being (stable continuity of things) and change/motion. All change/motion must have an unmoved mover, a start to the change that is itself unchanged. In many cases this mover can in turn be moved. Eventually, however, all motion can be traced back to a primary unmoved mover, which is not itself moved, but attracts motion "as does the object of desire." This unmoved mover lives in a state of pure activity, with no potentiality; its continuous activity is a pure insight into insight, a pure life of perfect and complete pleasure. In other words, change/motion is evoked by an unchanging presence; changeable things desire to achieve the state closest to unchanging presence they are capable of. Thus the stars move in circular locomotion (eternal and continuous), while animals "move" by generation w/in the same species, different matter coming to have the same form.

(*Metaphysics, Physics, On the Heavens, On the Generation of Animals, De Anima.*)

Practical Sciences seek knowledge that will change fledgling boys into full and flourishing citizens. The key to flourishing citizens, beyond the luck of proper birth and continuing health, is to arrange the proper upbringing that allows the proper emotional response to changing circumstances. The proper response is a "mean between extremes," but this mean is nothing mediocre or easy (e.g., courage, the mean between rashness and cowardice). Consistent achievement of this proper response is the best criterion changeable humans have that they are directing their lives according to *logos*, measured and rational speech, cut to fit the *cosmos* and *polis*. Even philosophers, who devote their lives to (momentary but renewable) insight and thus are as close to the state of the unmoved mover as any human can be, need practical science to lead the family and navigate the city which support their work.

(*Politics, Nicomachean Ethics.*)

Productive Sciences seek knowledge that will change external things, that will enable the creation of beautiful "objects" (plays and speeches).

(*Poetics, Rhetoric.*)