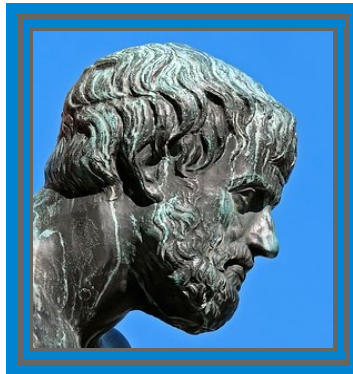


*Magister dixit.*¹

Classical Thought²



Aristotle (384BC-322BC) 1

Aristotle's Life

When Aristotle was born Plato was already 43, well into his career. Aristotle would not have known Socrates.

Born in Stagira in the northern part of classical Greece. His father was doctor to the king of Macedonia. When he was 17, his father sent him to Athens to study at Plato's academy. Aristotle was very impressed by Plato but he did not find Plato's dualism an adequate explanation of nature³.

In his philosophy, Aristotle did not completely reject Plato but he wanted to reformulate it to make it more relevant to the natural world. Aristotle wanted a public, objective and knowable reality as Plato had done and, like Plato, he also wanted to answer the question “what is the good life for man?” He did not want to have to give up the moral perspective. In this he is similar to Plato. Aristotle, like Plato wanted to give an account of the natural world that did not lead to the relativism of the Sophists⁴ who doubted whether truth could be known and considered it to be relative. Again this is similar to Plato. Aristotle also wanted to reformulate the traditional beliefs of the Greeks by putting them into a comprehensive naturalist system where they would not seem arbitrary and would harmonise with the world of nature and change around man. Plato's scheme answered atomists, sophists and traditionalist and Aristotle also had this objective.

Aristotle stayed at Plato's academy until Plato's death in 347BC and after that he spent some years travelling and gaining experience. In about 344BC Aristotle became paid tutor to the son of Philip of Macedonia – this was the young man who became known as Alexander the Great.

Alexander the Great did not adopt Aristotle's outlook or agree with his attitude and views about politics. When he came to power he had the opposite political regime to that which his tutor would have recommended.

In 335BC Aristotle returned to Athens to set up his own school the Lyceum. Plato's Academy was

1 “The teacher has said it.” A medieval saying referring to Aristotle and precluding further discussion.

2 These lessons are derived from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnow.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

3 See Term 2 Week 5 Day 4.

4 See Term 2 Week 1 Day 4

still functioning at this time. Aristotle wrote treatises on many subjects: physics, biology, ethics, logic. However these treatises are not necessarily quite what they seem. They take the form of notes he made for his students which they then collected and published under various topics. Sometimes they are sketchy sometimes they are well worked out and sometimes they end abruptly. This is because whoever edited them has collected the notes over a wide number of years and then sorted them by topic. Aristotle may have even changed his ideas over time and this accounts for seeming contradictions in the treatises.

In 323 Alexander the Great died. There followed a great public hue and cry against the Macedonian party which threatened Aristotle as he had been Alexander's teacher. He decided to withdraw from Athens to the Macedonian garrison. He explained, with a reference to Socrates, that he did not want the Athenians to sin twice against philosophy. His move did not gain him much time as he died a year later.

Aristotle's Philosophical Aims

The Milesian Philosophers⁵ had wanted to find out what was the stuff of reality and the Atomists⁶ asked what this stuff was made of but as we have already seen the materialistic answers they both offered could not explain change or the moral and religious nature of man. Aristotle was not willing to dismiss this human side of man and he wanted to reaffirm ethics of traditional Greek society. Plato's explanation was a systematic account in terms of another realm apart from the physical world. Aristotle thought that this did not give a satisfactory account of relationship between values of the realm of the *forms*⁷ and the perceptions of everyday experience that is: he did not agree with Plato that the *forms* transcended (were separate from) this world. So Aristotle found fault with the Milesians, the Atomists and with Plato.

The Problem of Change

Change seems to be irrational. How can we account for *a* changing to *b*? If *a* changes to *b* then is *b* then *a* as well as *b*? If the change is total *b* is not *a* so why do we say it was *a* in the first place? The atomists thought they had solved the problem by saying that qualitative change is attributable to the motion of atoms through space⁸ and Plato denied change. Aristotle pondered, if human reason cannot explain change maybe reason is not an adequate tool for understanding at all!

Plato had taught that what is intelligible is the *form* or *formula* common to all the particulars in a certain class. There is a *form* of triangularity or of goodness etc. Aristotle agreed but although he speaks of the *form* of things like Plato, he did not use word form in the same way. We will see next week just how his idea of the *forms* differed from that of his teacher. We will also see how his ideas, widespread as they became in the Middle Ages, were disastrous when mixed into Christian theology. They are still doing damage today!

Find Aristotle and Alexander the Great on your synchronological chart, if you have one, and notice how Plato's life overlaps. Revise, if you need to, the Milesians and the Atomists and Plato's ideas in order to understand this week's lesson.

5 Term 1 Week 2 Day 4

6 Term 1 Week 8 Day 4

7 Term 2 Week 5 Day 4

8 Term 1 Week 8 Day 4