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# Aristotle

on Ethics

Gerard J. Hughes

# Aristotle

## on Ethics

‘... for those attempting to come to grips with Aristotle’s *Ethics* in the context of his own work and time, Hughes provides a congenial and helpful introduction’

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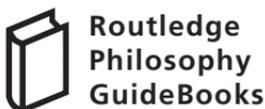
Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* is one of the most important and central texts in the history of Western philosophy. It lies at the heart of contemporary moral theory and is essential to understanding the history of ethics.

Gerard J. Hughes provides students with a stimulating, clear and accessible guide to Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*. He explains the key elements in Aristotle’s terminology and highlights the controversy regarding the interpretations of his writings. The GuideBook carefully explores each section of the text, and presents a detailed account of the problems Aristotle was trying to address, such as happiness, responsibility, moral education and friendship. It also examines the role that Aristotle’s *Ethics* continues to play in contemporary moral philosophy by comparing and contrasting his views with those widely held today.

*Aristotle on Ethics* is essential reading for all students coming to Aristotle for the first time and will provide an ideal starting point for anyone interested in ethical thought.

**Gerard J. Hughes** is Master of Campion Hall at the University of Oxford. He is the author of *The Nature of God* (Routledge, 1995).





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■ Gerard J. Hughes

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## Note on the text

For the sake of having one standard system which all scholars use, references to any work of Aristotle are always given according to the page, column and line in Bekker's Berlin Edition of 1831. This edition has the great advantage that each reference is quite unique. Thus, 1147b10 refers to line 10 of the second column on page 1147 of Bekker. Even with no mention of the title of the work, this is unambiguously a reference to the *Nicomachaeon Ethics*, Book VII, chapter 3. In this book I have given the standard references, but have also included the Book and chapter of the *Ethics* as an additional help to placing a reference in its context.

The translations here are my own. But since it is always useful to compare different translations of any ancient author, the reader might wish to consult the other translations given at the start of the Bibliography. To make the sense clearer I have occasionally inserted in square brackets a word which does not occur in the Greek, but can be deduced from the context.

## Aristotle's life and work

### An outline of his life and times

Aristotle came to Athens in 367 BCE at the age of 17, to go to university. 'University' in this case meant the Academy, the philosophical school founded by the great Plato, who himself had been a disciple of Socrates. Athens was *the* cultural centre of the Mediterranean, and its citizens would have had two reasons for not being immediately impressed by the young Aristotle. He came from the far north of Greece, from the city of Stagira in Macedonia; a country boy, then, doubtless lacking in cultural refinement. In this, the Athenian prejudice would have been misleading. Both Aristotle's parents came from families with a long tradition of the practice of medicine, and his father was court physician to King Amyntas III of Macedon. Court circles in Macedon were not uncivilized, and the value they placed upon education is demonstrated by the very fact of their sending Aristotle to Athens. There was, however, a second reason Athenians would have had for not welcoming Aristotle with wholly open arms.



He was connected with the royal family of Macedon, and Macedon had military ambitions. Amyntas's son Philip II embarked on a programme of militarist expansion which, much to the resentment of many prominent Athenians, led to his domination over much of Greece, and eventually to the subjugation of Athens itself.

Still, for twenty years Aristotle remained at the Academy, studying, debating, writing and teaching. Unfortunately, most of his writings from that time have been lost, and we are able to do little more than make educated guesses about precisely what he studied, and where his own interests lay. But as those years went by, the political situation brought about by the policies of Philip of Macedon rapidly worsened, and the climate in Athens became more and more nervous and hostile. Against this background, Aristotle, whose legal status in Athens was that of a resident alien, found himself regarded with suspicion. Finally the crisis came. Philip battered the city of Olynthus, one of Athens's close allies, into submission; and, a few months later, in 347, Plato died.

Aristotle was thus doubly isolated. Speusippus, a nephew of Plato, took over as head of the Academy. Would Aristotle have hoped that he himself might have got the job? Did his not getting it depend upon the fact that Speusippus was a relative of Plato, or on the fact that to appoint Aristotle would have been impossible in the prevailing political climate? Or was it perhaps that Aristotle's own philosophical views were by this time somewhat out of tune with the prevailing tone in the Academy? Whatever the academic reasons may have been, Aristotle thought it prudent, especially given the hostile political situation, to leave Athens and the Academy. He went to join a group of Platonists at Assos, a city on the north Aegean coast of what is now Turkey. The local monarch, Hermias, was himself interested in philosophy, and the philosophers encouraged him to fulfil the Platonic ideal of becoming a philosopher-king. Aristotle was later to write a hymn lamenting his untimely death (he was murdered) and praising his personal qualities 'for which he will be raised by the Muses to immortality'.

Before that, though, Aristotle had himself married Pythias, and they were again on the move. Philip II invited him to return to Macedonia to become tutor to his son Alexander. Alexander later was

to become known as 'the Great' because of his amazing conquests which extended the Macedonian Empire across what is now Turkey, Egypt, much of Western Asia, and on into India. Perhaps Aristotle hoped to inculcate Plato's ideals in the young heir to the throne, but in the light of the brutality of some of Alexander's campaigning tactics, one may wonder just how complete Aristotle's influence on his pupil was.

Alexander left for his campaigns in the east, and Aristotle once again returned to Athens, in 334, under the protection of Antipater, the regent whom Alexander had appointed, and who was one of Aristotle's closest friends. At some point during his time in Macedonia, Aristotle's daughter, called Pythias after her mother, was born, but, tragically, his wife died, perhaps in childbirth. It was probably to help with looking after his infant daughter that Aristotle either married, or lived with (the ancient sources differ on the point), Herpyllis. Whatever his legal relationship with her was, in his will Aristotle was to speak warmly of her devotion to him, and to make careful provision for her support. She also became the mother of his second child, this time a son whom he called Nicomachus.

Upon his arrival back in Athens, Aristotle founded his own philosophical school in a public exercise park called the Lyceum. The students there became known as 'peripatetics' from their custom of walking up and down (in Greek, *peripatein*) as they discussed their philosophical researches. Here in his Lyceum Aristotle taught and pursued his own research happily for the next eleven years. It was the most productive period of his life, and the time of his most enduring achievements. Once again, though, political disaster struck. Alexander died suddenly at the young age of 32. The Athenians at once saw their chance to rid themselves of the Macedonian regent. In a wave of anti-Macedonian feeling, they charged Aristotle with 'impiety', the same catch-all offence which had led to Socrates's execution two generations earlier. Once again Aristotle had to leave, remarking, it is said, that he did so 'lest the Athenians commit a second sin against philosophy'. He survived only a year in exile, and died at the age of 62, in 322.

## His works and philosophical background

The two great influences on Aristotle's philosophy were Plato and his own research into biology, especially the biology of animals.

Plato must have been a hard act to follow. He had developed and transformed the philosophical method of Socrates and applied it to an amazingly wide range of problems, including the immortality of the soul, the nature of virtue, the meaning of justice, and the theory of truth. He had attempted to give a theoretical justification for what he regarded as the right way to live both as an individual and as a member of the city-state. In so doing, he had been forced to seek for the foundations of ethics and politics by developing highly original views in metaphysics and in the theory of knowledge. The very scope and style of philosophy itself were those which had become established in Plato's Academy. The framework was to all appearances firmly established. Was there any room for genuine originality?

Recall that Aristotle studied and debated in Plato's Academy for twenty years, from the age of 17 until he was 37. He must surely have been enormously influenced not merely by Plato's method and by the conclusions which Plato and his students believed to be beyond dispute, but also by the places at which Plato's arguments were recognized as deficient, often by Plato himself. It is still a matter of dispute whether the young Aristotle started off by being more in agreement with Plato and ended up being much more critical; or whether he was more critical in his earlier years and only later began to see that there was perhaps somewhat more to be said for his old teacher's views than he used to think. It may also be true that the brilliant young pupil influenced his teacher, and that this influence shows up in some of Plato's later works.<sup>1</sup> Still, at least some things are reasonably clear. Aristotle retained Plato's interests in ethics and politics, and like

<sup>1</sup> The problem is not made any easier by the fact that we cannot with certainty date many of Aristotle's works even to the extent of clearly distinguishing the later from the earlier. In any case many of Aristotle's works are known to be lost. For a short and judicious comment on the problems of saying anything about Aristotle's philosophical development, see T. H. Irwin [1988], ch. 1, §5, pp. 11–13, and the articles referred to in Irwin's notes.

Plato agreed that ethics and politics had ultimately to rest on more general considerations of epistemology and metaphysics. There are also some similarities in method. Plato, following Socrates, often starts his dialogues by eliciting the views of one of his students, and then going on to see how far those views will stand up to criticism. Somewhat similarly, Aristotle habitually takes as his starting points *endoxa*, 'received opinions'. By this term Aristotle means to include views which are held by everyone, or at least by most people, as well as those held by the wise.<sup>2</sup> We should start, then, with what common sense might suggest, or with what earlier philosophers have thought, and then subject those views to critical assessment. Aristotle is more sympathetic than Plato to the thought that most people cannot be wholly mistaken.

The view most popularly ascribed to Aristotle is that he rejected Plato's 'Theory of Forms'. Certainly at one time Plato did believe that, if words like 'beauty' or 'courage' or 'equality' or 'good' were to have any meaning, they must point to the corresponding Forms – really existing, perfect, instances of these properties. Only if there are such Forms as Beauty itself, or Goodness itself, will there be any satisfactory explanation of the way in which we understand the beauty and goodness of this-worldly things, imperfect as they are. Only if these perfect Forms exist will there be any solid basis for morality, or indeed for knowledge itself. So, the popular view has it, Aristotle had no time for such metaphysical speculations, and made a radical break with Plato. This view is a gross oversimplification. First, Plato himself later in his life at least considerably modified the Theory of Forms, if by that is meant the kind of views advanced in the *Phaedo*. Besides, Aristotle is perfectly willing to talk about forms, and on some interpretations even ended up by holding a view of forms not wholly unlike Plato's. Still, there is an important truth behind the oversimplification. The clue lies in Aristotle's interest in biology, which perhaps had been first aroused by his parents with their medical background and practice. Much of the research done by Aristotle and his students consisted in the meticulous examination and classification of animals, fish and insects, and in the attempt to explain why they were

<sup>2</sup> *Topics* 100b21; see also *Nicomachean Ethics* 1143b11–14, 1145b2–7.

as they were, and why they behaved as they behaved. Aristotle was convinced that the explanations were to be found not in some super-sensible world of Platonic Forms, but in the internal organization of the organisms themselves. Their patterns of growth, development and behaviour were directed by an inbuilt purposiveness, different for each species, the nature of which could be called the 'form' of that organism, and could be discovered by patient study and inquiry. More generally, perhaps the nature of every kind of thing could be discovered in a similar way. This quest for the natures of things – for the *phusis* of each kind of thing – is what Aristotle called *Physics*; and the further underlying truths about explanation in general, upon which such inquiries ultimately rested, were what he discussed in his *Metaphysics*.<sup>3</sup>

Here, then, is the original contribution which Aristotle believed he could make towards handling the questions that Plato had raised. Instead of looking to an abstract discipline such as mathematics to provide the ultimate explanation of things, as did the Platonists in the Academy, Aristotle proposed to study in detail the world around him, and to deal with the philosophical implications of that study in an integrated way. What, he asks, must be the fundamental characteristics of a world if inquiry into the natures of things in that world is to be possible at all? Like Plato, then, Aristotle seeks to know the ultimate explanations of things; unlike Plato, he thinks that questions about ultimate explanations must arise out of, rather than dispense with, mundane questions about how we are to explain the shapes and movements and growth of animals, and the regular behaviour of the inanimate parts of nature. In particular, looking at how the different species of organisms are by nature impelled to pursue what is good for them, we can begin to see how values are central to the behaviour of living things. Once we learn to look at ourselves as animals, and to understand how animals function, we can begin to glimpse how biology, with its inbuilt values, can in the case of thinking animals like ourselves lead on to ethics.

<sup>3</sup> 'Meta-Physics' probably refers to an inquiry which comes *after* (*meta* in Greek) the direct inquiry into the natures of things, when the inquirer sees that deeper questions must be dealt with.

Aristotle would have thought it astonishing if thinking animals like ourselves had no way of expressing to themselves what was good for them. So, at many points in the *Ethics*, he starts by considering what people usually or frequently think about various questions connected with morality, on the assumption that their views must either be right or at least contain some considerable kernel of truth which would explain why people hold them. But is this assumption a reasonable one to make? Might an entire society not be blind to the rights of women, or accept racist beliefs quite uncritically? Quite in general, does Aristotle's method not amount to little more than repeating the prejudices and unquestioned assumptions of his own culture? Aristotle might reply to this that he has no intention of *merely* repeating the views of the ordinary person, nor of the wise, without criticizing and assessing them. If one asks how this criticism is to proceed, Aristotle would reply that a good first step would be to bring into the open any hidden inconsistencies in common beliefs, and try to sort those out. But, the critic might press the point, even if that results in a coherent account, mere coherence doesn't guarantee *truth*. A person might be consistently racist or sexist and still be simply mistaken, surely? Aristotle might reply to this that even if it is comparatively easy to be consistent within a limited area of one's beliefs (say, about the rights of women), it is much harder to be consistent across a wide spectrum of one's beliefs. One would have to integrate ethics and psychology, physiology, sociology and the rest; and once one tries to do this, at some point the hidden inconsistencies will reappear. Achieving an overall 'fit' between one's experience and one's beliefs is not at all easy; and when it has been achieved, that is as close as one is ever likely to come to the truth. This is a very complex issue, and we shall have to see as we go along whether Aristotle's method seems likely to deliver what he is looking for.

For the moment, at least, this much can be said. Like Plato, Aristotle is concerned to get behind what people might happen to think in order to assess their views, to examine their foundations and their justification. Like Plato, Aristotle is concerned with how individuals ought to live, and how they ought to contribute to their communities. He, too, is concerned with the nature of moral virtues, justice, personal responsibility and moral weakness. Like Plato, he believes that ethics

must be rooted in a view of the human soul. But unlike Plato, his conception of what a soul is derives in the first instance from biology, rather than from religious views about the incarnation and reincarnation of a disembodied true self. And this difference has profound implications for morality.

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This bibliography is not intended to be in any sense complete. It includes only those works which I take to be the most accessible to those coming to the subject for the first time.

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