ARISTOTLE

Aristotle is so synonymous with learning that he has been known simply as ‘the Mind’, ‘the Reader’ and ‘the Philosopher’. Admired by both Darwin and Marx, Edith Hall explores his life and legacy.

Exactly 2,400 years ago, in 384 BC, a boy was born in the town of Stagira in a remote part of northern Greece. Stagira perches on two cliff-tops jutting into the Aegean on the easternmost prongs of the peninsula called Chalkidike, between Thessaloniki and the Hellespont. Strategically more significant than its size might suggest, Stagira had seen mighty conquerors and allies, including Persia, Athens and Sparta. In 384 it was struggling to remain independent of its rapidly expanding neighbour, Macedon.

The baby’s name was Aristotle. His father was a learned and much-published doctor called Nicomachus, descended from an illustrious line of medical practitioners; his services were used by the Macedonian monarch, Amyntas III, father of Philip II and grandfather of Alexander III (‘the Great’). Aristotle’s mother, Phaestis, was from a wealthy family with estates in the long island of Euboea, off the eastern shore of mainland Greece. Nicomachus and Phaestis cannot have imagined that their infant was destined to play a part in the genesis of the largest empire yet ruled from Europe. By the time he died, in his early sixties, Aristotle would have changed the shape of most academic subjects forever. Our consciousness has been shaped by his work. If you explain the material world through rational science, based on systematic empirical observation, you are thinking in the way that Aristotle pioneered (one reason he was praised by Charles Darwin). If you believe that the fundamental building block of human society is the individual partnership or association and that economic factors are central to historical developments, you are thinking like an Aristotelian (one reason why he was esteemed by Karl Marx). If you suppose that humans are able to make moral choices without appealing to divine intervention and in the face of random factors including luck, you are deliberating and exercising moral agency in the manner in which students were trained at Aristotle’s Athenian school, the Lyceum.

Aristotle obviously enjoyed the prosperity and leisure that allowed him to make full use of the stimuli and education to which he was exposed. He was certainly standing on the shoulders of Greek giants in natural science and philosophy, including Thales, Democritus, Protagoras, Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato. But he was undeniably brilliant. No other individual has ever taken so many huge strides forward in such a wide range of intellectual fields.

Yet Aristotle’s intellect was undoubtedly constrained by some of the social prejudices of his day. It is unfashionable to praise Aristotle because, in the first book of his Politics, he defends slavery (when the slaves are not Greek and, in his view, are intellectually incapable of using freedom responsibly). He also believed that women are biologically incapable of rational deliberation, views which, rightly, have been attacked over recent decades. Yet neglecting Aristotle’s capacity for game-changing thought on almost every other issue, simply because he accepted some views which seemed self-evident to everyone in his era, produces a distorted view of intellectual history. Apologists for plantation slavery in 19th-century America may have cited Aristotle when defending atrocious practices, but critics of slavery have pointed to the instruction in his will that...
none of his slaves was to be sold. They were all to be emancipated, either immediately or later by his heirs. Aristotle’s low estimation of women’s rationality has, similarly, been cited by men opposing the education of females. Yet he also, rather radically, compared the relationship between man and wife with that between (near-) equal citizens rather than between a monarch and his subject.

Aristotle’s life was entangled with the rise of the Macedonian empire. Orphaned in childhood, he apparently spent his early teenage years shuttling between the house of a brother-in-law in what is now north-western Turkey and the Macedonian court. Just two years older than Amyntas’ son, Philip, Aristotle forged a lasting bond with this ruthless but gifted prince. At 17, the scholarly youth was sent to Athens to study with Plato, the greatest teacher in the Greek world, and stayed for 20 years. Aristotle soon gained a reputation for dazzling intelligence; Plato called him the ‘The Mind’ and complained that the Academy fell quiet in his absence. The other students called him ‘The Reader’. Yet when Plato died, Aristotle was not appointed head of the Academy, perhaps on account of his Macedonian connections as well as his disagreement with central Platonic doctrines. He went back to north-west Turkey to help a fellow student, Hermias, establish a philosophical circle in the Greek cities of Atarneus and Assos, of which Hermias was ruler. Aristotle married Hermias’ daughter Pythias; although she died young, the marriage was happy and produced a daughter, named after her mother.

Aristotle subsequently moved to the nearby island of Lesbos. For two years he researched marine biology, laying the foundations of zoology as it is still studied today. But Philip, who had ascended the Macedonian throne in 359 BC, did not forget him. In 343, when they were both around 40, the one-eyed autocrat appointed Aristotle tutor at Pella to his most promising son, Alexander, now in his early teens. For seven or eight years Aristotle was Alexander’s mentor, teacher and, presumably, close companion.

Five years later, in 338, the Macedonian army defeated Athens and Thebes at the Battle of Chaeronea. Alexander, who was only 18, shone in combat. Every community in mainland Greece, with the exception of Sparta, now agreed under the terms of a treaty to form a ‘league’. But Philip actually intended to create a massive world-conquering Hellenic army under his absolute command. We do not know how Aristotle felt about this development. He will doubtless have been relieved to be on the victorious ‘side’.

**Five Key Works**

**No.1: Nicomachean Ethics**

Based on notes from his lectures in the Lyceum, Aristotle posits happiness (eudaimonia) or ‘living well’ as the primary goal in human life. Named for his son, Nicomachus, the Ethics considers how man should best live and those virtues which produce happiness. Aristotle argues that man does not need to act to commit a crime: omitting to do something can be just as unethical.
But his works on political theory usually advocate the independent, self-sufficient city state as the ideal community. When Philip had sacked Aristotle’s own hometown of Stagira ten years earlier, the philosopher had persuaded him to free the citizens he had enslaved and rebuild their damaged buildings.

Nor was Philip content with mastery of Greece. In 336, he ordered the invasion of Asia by a force led by his most trusted general, taking advantage of the Persian crisis precipitated by the murder of Artaxerxes IV. Philip was himself assassinated before he could traverse the Hellespont and join his army. His 20-year-old son inherited the throne and the offensive war against Persia. But before he marched east, Alexander quelled an uprising of the Athenian League fomented by Demosthenes, the anti-Macedonian Athenian statesman. Aristotle seized the opportunity to return to Athens. The city which still dominated intellectual culture was now safe for associates of Macedonian royalty. He must have been delighted to found his own university at last, in his ‘wolfish’ avatar. Apollo, as god of medicine, poetry and prophetic omniscience, was the perfect patron for a multidisciplinary research institute. Alexander now crossed to Asia, never to return. By 332 he had taken Egypt; two years later he had conquered the Persian Empire; in 327 he invaded India.

Athens provided Aristotle with a home for his sixth decade. He received updates from Alexander’s campaign, probably including samples of flora and fauna sent by his great-nephew, Callisthenes, who accompanied Alexander until they became estranged and Callisthenes died prematurely. During these years, Aristotle finally wrote most of his 150 treatises (just a small proportion of which survive). His prolific output later in life may have been facilitated by his sudden ability to devote himself full-time to intellectual labour. He must have been repelled by rumours of the exhausting struggle at Pella between Alexander’s mother Olympias and Antipater, Alexander’s regent; he probably felt relieved to be distanced from the wild carousals, murderous in-fighting, emotional dramas, paranoia and superstition, which characterised Macedonian palace life. The man in charge of Athens, on the other hand, was now Lycurgus, a wise and experienced elder statesman. Although he had sided with opponents of the Macedonian conquest, Lycurgus maintained the peace, imposing the laws strictly. He was also, like Aristotle, a former pupil of Plato and sympathetic to philosophical pursuits. Aristotle found new domestic stability with a woman named Her-pyllis from Stagira. She bore him the son, Nicomachus, to whom he dedicated the Nicomachean Ethics.

The philosopher now surrounded himself with loyal disciples, including Theophrastus from Lesbos, an old friend and the leading Greek botanist. The Lyceum was self-governing; one of its members was elected chief administrator every ten days. Aristotle taught his students in the morning and gave more accessible public lectures (which regrettably have not survived) in the afternoons; he liked to walk as he taught, which is why his followers were called the ‘Peripatetics’, from the Greek verb meaning ‘stroll’. An innovative aspect of the Lyceum’s work was its emphasis on amassing books and intensive bibliographical research into previous scholars’ findings. Aristotle’s own book (or rather, papyrus-roll) collection helped to inspire the huge library which the first Macedonian King of Egypt, Ptolemy I, founded at Alexandria with a Lyceum alumnus, Demetrius of Phalerum, as consultant.

The Idea of a community of book-loving scholars cooperating on research projects, which came to magnificent fruition at Alexandria, originated in Aristotle’s visionary Lyceum. He encouraged its members to conduct collaborative ventures in every branch of knowledge, to investigate authorities thoroughly and to publish textbooks. Several important works by his students have survived, revealing how his methods, including statistics, were applied to mechanics and diving technology, volcanoes and meteors, psychology and aesthetics. Many Lyceum projects had direct public and civic applications and often preserved invaluable information from ancient archives. The Constitution of Athens, for example, researched and written by a Peripatetic and found on a papyrus in the late 19th century, transformed our understanding of the Athenian Council. The treatise was probably written, under Aristotle’s supervision, as one of the

Five Key Works No.2: Politics
When describing man as a ‘political animal’, Aristotle argues that the polis – or city state – is humanity’s natural habitat. Politics, meaning ‘things concerning the polis’, explores the best ways that man might live in society and describes how royalty, aristocracy and constitutional government corrupt to become tyranny, oligarchy and democracy. For Aristotle, different species have naturally occurring and fixed characteristics.
Constitutions of individual city states that the Lyceum is said to have produced. Aristotle himself set about recording the full extent of his life’s reflection and investigations. His contribution to intellectual history is incalculable and not only to western philosophy. His *Metaphysics* in particular, when translated into Arabic, was instrumental in the foundation of Arabic philosophy (*falsafa*) in the ninth century AD; it elicited a massive commentary by the Spanish Arab philosopher Ibn Rushd, who had studied avidly in the West as well, where he was better-known as Averroes.

In his two dazzling books on ethics, Aristotle posits happiness (*eudaimonia*) or ‘living in the best way possible’ as the fundamental goal of human life. The traditional translation of *eudaimonia* as ‘happiness’ has drawbacks, since that noun describes an emotional state, whereas to Aristotle it is a mental state in which one is enabled, by practising certain virtues – courage, self-control, liberality, fairness – to aim at the highest good. *Eudaimonia* is an activity equivalent to living rationally, in an examined and deliberated way. Aristotle’s political theory was an extension of this ethical position to the whole community, since happiness is the goal of the city state and the reason for its existence.

Aristotle’s writings are unified by the methods of reasoning he evolved, expressed in a group of works on logic which were later assembled and named his *Organon* (**Instrument**). Aristotelian methods monopolised the entire history of philosophical logic until the critiques of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell appeared in the 19th and 20th centuries. It remains astounding that Aristotle was able to take the methods of philosophical reasoning, which he found in Plato and his predecessors, and treat the actual inferential systems as the topic of analysis themselves; that is, he was interested not only in what made the world function, but in the exact workings of the arguments on which thinkers based their conclusions about the world. With Aristotle’s contribution, Philosophy itself had become the object of philosophical analysis.

Aristotle’s precious last period of intense intellectual activity was cut short by the death of Alexander in 323 BC. The Athenians turned against everyone associated with Macedonian rule. Aristotle sensed danger. In a politically motivated move, the anti-Macedonian lobby in Athens decided to prosecute him, as they had Socrates a lifetime before, for impiety – specifically, with failing to honour the city’s gods. Aristotle escaped with his family to the ancestral estate belonging to his mother in Euboea. He died the year after. It is possible that he was murdered, but more likely that he died from the stomach complaint which had long plagued him. The place of his burial is unknown, although the medieval travelogue of Sir John Mandeville, first printed in 1499, claimed that there was a tomb and cult, as if for a saint, in Stagira. The Anglo-American archaeologist Sir Charles Waldstein, on the other hand, claimed in the early 1890s to have excavated the tomb of Aristotle, complete with writing styluses and a portrait statuette.

**Five Key Works**

No. 3: *Metaphysics*

Meaning ‘after the physics’, Aristotle’s study is the first work to bear the title, though Aristotle himself did not use the term and it is thought to have been added in the first century. Aristotle describes the work as the study of being qua being or the ‘first philosophy’, in which the author examines the nature of ‘things that can be said to be’.

Doric columns of the Temple of Athena at Assos, Turkey.
in Euboea near Chalcis. According to the most colourful
tradition of Aristotle's death, however, he drowned himself
in the narrow straits between Euboea and the Greek main­
land. The suicide was allegedly motivated by frustration
that he could not scientifically understand the violent tides
there, which reverse direction four times a day, a problem
not solved until 1929. But the suicide was an invention
of Aristotle's early Christian detractors, who hated his
scientific outlook and denial of Plato's invisible, perfect
world of ideas of which the material and fleshly world we
inhabit is but a secondary – and vastly inferior – copy. The
Christian Fathers wanted to present Aristotle as a last-min­
ute religious convert, finally acknowledging that he could
not explain the universe without God: he was supposed to
have cried out as he fell, 'Since Ar­
istotle did not grasp Euripus, let
Euripus take Aristotle.' Aristotle's
fabricated conversion continued
to be cited by Christians until well
into the 17th century.

A
RISTOTLE WAS NOT
in fact an atheist at all.
He believed that there
was a divine being of
some kind, endowed (or even
to be identified) with absolute
intellectual power. This 'unmoved
mover' of the universe took no
interest in human affairs and
did not reward or punish good
or bad behaviour. Humans, who
alone among animals on Earth
are endowed with a portion of
intellectual capacity similar to
that of the supreme power, needed, he argued, to study
the diverse, fascinating, beautiful material world in all its
manifestations and attempt to explain what their senses
could perceive empirically and their minds grasp in more
abstract terms. Aristotle would have enjoyed Kepler's
inclusion of him, in note nine to his Somnium (1634), in a
list of martyrs of science persecuted by dogmatic believers.
But he would have been baffled by his popularity among the
more traditional 'scholastic' medieval Christians, who after
discovering his dialectical (question-and-answer) method
in the 11th and 12th centuries enthusiastically used it to
develop their complicated theories of atonement and prove,
via the 'ontological argument', the existence of God. Most
famous Scholastics, up to and including Thomas Aquinas,
achieved the extraordinary feat of reconciling Aristotelian
philosophical method with their Roman Catholic theologi­
cal viewpoint; this inevitably meant that the content of his
works, in Latin versions and by the 14th century in French
vernacular translations, became familiar among the educat­
ed class of Europe. Dante was only reflecting popular sen­
timent when in the Inferno he called Aristotle simply 'the
master of those who know' (il Maestro di color che sanno).

It is only in the context of the overwhelming Scholastic
dominance of European scholarship that Martin Luther's
vitriolic denunciation of Aristotle in his Open Letter to the
Christian Nobility of the German Nation (1520) makes sense:
'It grieves me to the heart that this damned, conceited,
rashly heathen has with his false words deluded and made

Five Key Works
No.4: Poetics
Considered to be the oldest
surviving work of literary
criticism, Aristotle produces
a theory of how to construct
drama through a study
of the plays of Sophocles
and Euripides and epic
poetry. Drama was central
to life in ancient Greece:
Aristotle contended its study
could offer a better moral
education than history.
Poetics is still referenced on
screenwriting courses today.

Top: the myth of Aristotle
jumping into the waves to
his death, 1786.
Bottom: Plato and Aristotle
(philosophy) tile, by Luca
fools of so many of the best Christians.’ Luther’s primary objection was to Aristotle’s argument in *On the Soul* that human consciousness dies with the body. All his works on science, ethics and politics needed to be discarded altogether, thundered Luther, although even he conceded that the works on rhetoric, poetry and logic could help students refine their techniques of argumentation. Aristotle’s name carried such unique authority that well into the 17th century he was often simply referred to as ‘the philosopher’; a shrewd London publisher named John How exploited the popular assumption of Aristotle’s incontrovertibility by naming an illustrated sex-and-babies manual (first published in 1684 but destined to run into hundreds of editions all the way until the 1930s), *Aristotle’s Masterpiece*. It had no connection with Aristotle, being a pot-pourri of materials from previous midwives’ handbooks and sensational works on human anthropology, but it familiarised vast numbers of otherwise uneducated people in Britain and America with Aristotle’s name.

ARISTOTLE’s authentic treatises are some of the most influential on subsequent history. The vocabulary of European political theory was born when Aristotle on *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* have exerted the most influence on subsequent history. The vocabulary of European political theory was born when the *Politics* was first translated into modern languages in the 15th century. Its comparison of different constitutional models—democratic, monarchical, oligarchic—has been deployed by advocates of all three. After the execution of Charles I in 1649, Milton’s *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, which justifies regicide under some circumstances, uses Aristotle’s definition of a monarch. It is commonly said that it was the Roman Republic that provided the prototype when the American founding fathers were formulating the constitution, but the philosophical language in which Jefferson phrased the citizen’s right to pursue happiness in the *Declaration of Independence* (1776) emphasised the founders’ adherence to an Aristotelian heritage.

Twenty years later, George Washington’s ‘Farewell Address’ offered Americans several Aristotelian injunctions. Their republic and their liberty needed to be built on the moral ‘dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity’ and ‘human happiness’, since ‘virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government’.

We can trace Aristotle’s continuing role in public and academic discourse by looking for the distinctive vocabulary which he pioneered—of theory and practice, potentiality and its actualisation, substance and essence, tragic catharsis and tragic error. Yet mystery surrounds Aristotle’s direct influence in history through his relationship with Philip and Alexander. His role at their court can be seen as analogous to the contribution made by the experts in other fields whom Philip’s wealth in timber, silver and gold enabled him to lure to Macedon from across the Greek world—his Cretan admiral Nearchos and his engineer Aristoboulos from Cassandreia. But these men came to Macedon to help build a world-conquering militia and navy, a phenomenon of which it is notoriously difficult to find much discussion in Aristotle.

He writes with remarkable approval about some aspects of democracy; perhaps his own happiest years were those spent during his two sojourns in Athens. Just how much the philosopher contributed to the dream of world empire, conceived by Philip but realised by Alexander, is one of the conundrums of world history. On a more personal level, we will never know whether he came to regard his former protégé as a drunken megalomaniac or a visionary who dreamt of a peaceful, unified family of mankind. Was Aristotle among the many Macedonians who resented Alexander’s cultivation of Persian friends, allies and court protocol (especially the belief in the divinity of the king), as well as his politically motivated marriage to Roxana, the Bactrian princess? Or did he believe that Alexander planned a new kind of tolerant, ‘multicultural’ arrangement, an ethnically diverse joint enterprise, a utopian brotherhood of man based on virtue and reason? Sadly, we are unlikely ever to know. If Aristotle did ever commit his true feelings—positive or negative—about the Macedonian project to a papyrus, it disappeared long ago.

Edith Hall is the author of *Introducing the Ancient Greeks* (Bodley Head, 2015).

**FURTHER READING**


