

Biography of Aristotle



Aristotle was born in 384 BC, in Stagira, near Macedonia at the northern end of the Aegean Sea. His father, Nicomachus, was the family physician of King Amyntas of Macedonia. It is believed that Aristotle's ancestors had been the physicians of the Macedonian royal family for several generations. Having come from a long line of physicians, Aristotle received training and education that inclined his mind toward the study of natural phenomena. This education had long-lasting influences, and was probably the root cause of his less idealistic stand on philosophy as opposed to Plato. Aristotle's father died when he was a boy, and Aristotle was left under the care of his guardian Proxenus.

When Aristotle was seventeen, Proxenus sent him to study at Plato's Academy in Athens, the heart of the intellectual world at the time. Aristotle remained at the Academy for twenty years, until Plato's death in 347 BC. Although Aristotle was Plato's most promising student, Aristotle did not succeed Plato as head of the Academy because of their opposing views on several fundamental philosophical issues, specifically regarding Plato's theory of ideas. As has already been noted, Aristotle was more concerned than Plato with the actual material world, and did not believe that the only thing that mattered is the realm of ideas and perfect forms.

After leaving the Academy, Aristotle was invited to go live in the court of his friend Hermeas, ruler of Atarneus and Assos in Mysia. Aristotle remained there for three years, during which time he married Pythias, the niece and adopted daughter of the king. Later in life Aristotle married Herpyllis, with whom had a son, named Nicomachus after his father. When Hermeas' kingdom was taken over by Persians, Aristotle moved to Mytilene. King Amyntas invited Aristotle to tutor his thirteen-year old son, Alexander, later known as Alexander the Great. Aristotle tutored Alexander for five years until King Amyntas died and Alexander came to power. In gratitude for Aristotle's services, Alexander provided Aristotle generously with means for the acquisition of books and for the pursuit of scientific inquiry. While the extent to which Aristotle's tutoring influenced Alexander's successes in conquering an empire is disputable, Alexander did try to organize much of his empire along the model of the Greek city-state.

In 335 BC Aristotle went back to Athens, where he found the Academy flourishing under Xenocrates. Aristotle founded his own school, the Lyceum, and ran it for twelve years. The school is often called the Peripatetic School, because Aristotle used to like walking around and discusses his ideas with his colleagues. Peripatetics are "people who walk around." Aristotle would have detailed discussions with a small group of advanced students in the mornings, and larger lectures in the evenings. During his time at the Lyceum, Aristotle wrote extensively on a wide range of subjects: politics, metaphysics, ethics, logic and science.

Aristotle agreed with Plato that the cosmos is rationally designed and that philosophy can come to know absolute truths by studying universal forms. Their ideas diverged, however, in that Aristotle thought that one finds the universal in particular things, while Plato believed the universal exists apart from particular things, and that material things are only a shadow of true reality, which exists

in the realm of ideas and forms. The fundamental difference between the two philosophers is that Plato thought only pure mathematical reasoning was necessary, and therefore focused on metaphysics and mathematics. Aristotle, on the other hand, thought that in addition to this "first philosophy," it is also necessary to undertake detailed empirical investigations of nature. Thus, Aristotle believed it important to study what he called "second philosophy," which includes such subjects as physics, mechanics and biology. Aristotle's philosophy therefore involved both inductive and deductive reasoning, observing the workings of the world around him and then reasoning from the particular to a knowledge of essences and universal laws. In a sense, Aristotle was the first major proponent of the modern scientific method. The Lyceum was an unprecedented school of organized scientific inquiry. No comparable scientific enterprise existed for over 2,000 years after the founding of the Lyceum.

In 323 BC Alexander the Great died unexpectedly and the government of Athens was overthrown by anti-Macedonian forces. Having had close connections with the Macedonian royal family, Aristotle was associated with them and was unpopular with the new ruling powers. The new government brought charges of impiety against Aristotle, but he fled to his country house in Chalcis in Euboea to escape prosecution. Aristotle commented that he fled so that "the Athenians might not have another opportunity of sinning against philosophy as they had already done in the person of Socrates." About a year later, Aristotle died after complaints of a stomach illness.

Aristotle's writings were preserved by his student Theophrastus, his successor as leader of the Peripatetic School. Theophrastus' pupil Neleus and his heirs concealed the books in a vault to protect them from theft, but they were damaged by dampness, moths and worms. The books were found around 100 BC by Apellicon, who brought them to Rome. In Rome, scholars took interest in the works and prepared new editions of them. The writings of Aristotle that we have today are based on this collection. Overall, Aristotle wrote three types of works: dialogues or other works of a popular character, collections of scientific data and observations, and systematic treatises. His philosophy can be divided into four main areas: 1) Logic; 2) Theoretical Philosophy, including Metaphysics, Physics and Mathematics; 3) Practical Philosophy, such as Ethics and Politics; and 4) Poetical Philosophy, covering the study of poetry and the fine arts.

Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics

Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics was written around 340 BC. It is probably named after either his father or son, who were both named Nicomachus. Nicomachean Ethics is Aristotle's most mature work on ethics. Aristotle's argument, as presented in his book which sometimes seems to flow very poorly, is due to the untranslatability of certain Greek / Thracian words into modern philosophical English usage.

A few questions before reading further:

1. What does Aristotelian Ethics have to do with modern business?
2. What subject areas does Aristotle and other ancient philosophers focus upon that should make us stop and think about what makes us tick ... what motivates us to certain ethical / non-ethical behaviors?

3. Does virtuous, good (beautiful), thoughtful behavior have any importance or relevance to the Business Development or Customer Engagement Processes?
4. Does Aristotle have anything to say about planning strategies, tactics or positioning oneself to the real world?

Aristotle's Ethics Summary:

Nicomachean Ethics is a philosophical inquiry into the nature of the good life for a human being. Aristotle begins the work by theorizing the existence of some ultimate good toward which, in the final analysis, all human actions ultimately aim. The necessary characteristics of the ultimate good are that it is complete, final, self-sufficient and continuous. This good toward which all human actions implicitly or explicitly aim is called happiness (in Greek, "eudemonia"), which can also be translated as blessedness or living well. Happiness as such is not a static state of being, but a type of activity.

To discover the nature of human happiness it is necessary to determine what the function of a human being is, for a person's happiness will consist in fulfilling the natural function toward which his being is directed. This natural function must be something which is specific to human beings, and is essential to being human. A person is primarily his intellect. While the spirited and desiring parts of the soul are also important, the rational part of the soul is what one can most properly consider a person's identity. The activity which only human beings can perform is intellectual; it is activity of the highest part of the soul (the rational part) according to reason. Human happiness, therefore, consists in activity of the soul according to reason. In practical terms, this activity is expressed through ethical virtue, i.e. when a person directs his actions according to reason. The very highest human life, however, consists in contemplation of the greatest goods. More will be said later on this topic, which is the culmination of the Ethics.

Ethical virtue "is a habit disposed toward action by deliberate choice, being at the mean relative to us, and defined by reason as a prudent man would define it." Each of the elements of this definition is important. **Virtue** is not simply an isolated action but a habit of acting well. For an action to be virtuous a person must do it deliberately, knowing what he is doing, and doing it because it is a noble action. In each specific situation, the virtuous action is a mean between two extremes. Socrates, years earlier, dramatized the same notion of pairing one's knowledge with one's actions would say it this way: "...To know the good is to do the good". "The good" in this context, is the virtuous act.

Before going into a discussion of the individual virtues it is necessary to clarify what it means for an action to be voluntary, since only voluntary actions can be virtuous. For an action to be involuntary, there must be some external principle causing the action and the person must not contribute anything to the action. An action done through fear is only partially voluntary, and an action done through ignorance may have different degrees of voluntariness, depending on whether or not the person would have wanted to do it if he had known what he was doing. A proper intention is necessary for virtuous action. Intention is not a desire, a wish or an opinion. It is something previously deliberated upon, and is formed with reason or thought. One can only intend something which one has the power to do.

The first virtue discussed is **bravery**. It is a *mean* or in between rashness and cowardice. A brave man is one who faces and fears what he should for the right reason, in the right manner and at the right

time. A brave man performs his actions for the sake of what is noble. A brave man is thus one who is fearless in facing a noble death.

The next virtue is **temperance**. It is a mean with regard to bodily pleasures. The intemperate man desires pleasurable things and chooses them because they are pleasurable; he is pained when he fails to get what he desires. A temperate man is moderately disposed with regard to pleasures and pains. He loves such pleasures as right reason dictates. Temperance keeps the desiring part of the soul in harmony with reason.

Generosity is the third virtue which Aristotle examines. With regard to property, generosity is a mean between wastefulness and stinginess. A generous man will give to the right person, in the right amounts, and at the right times. He will also take proper care of his possessions. Generosity does not depend on the quantity of the giving but on the habit of the giver. This takes into account the amount which the giver himself both has and is able to give away.

The next virtue is **munificence**, which consists giving large amounts for suitable occasions. The deficiency of this virtue is called meanness and the excess is ostentation. A munificent man spends gladly and lavishly, not calculating costs, but always for a noble purpose.

Magnanimity, the fifth virtue Aristotle discusses, is one of the peaks of virtue. A magnanimous man claims and deserves great honors. Someone who deserves honors but doesn't claim them is low-minded. Someone who claims honors but doesn't deserve them is vain. It is better to be vain than low-minded, because vanity will be naturally corrected by life experience. A magnanimous man is great in each of the virtues, and exemplifies virtues because he shows how good a virtuous life is in reality.

The next virtue concerns **honor**, specifically small and medium honors. It is a mean between too much and too little ambition, which can be described as right ambition.

The virtue that is a mean with respect to anger is good temper. The excesses are irascibility or bitterness. If one is irascible he gets angry quickly and retaliates, but then forgets about it. Someone who is bitter holds anger for a long period of time. A good tempered man is one who becomes angry on the right occasions, with the right people, at the right time, and for the right length of time.

The next three virtues are **friendliness**, the mean between flattery or obsequiousness and quarrelsomeness; **truthfulness**, the mean between boastfulness and self-depreciation, and **wit**, the mean with regard to humor and amusement. Wit entails saying the right things, in the right manner, and also listening to things properly.

The last virtue, which unites and orders all of the other virtues, is **justice**. Justice can also be considered in a more specific sense, as simply one of the virtues. Both justice in the specific sense and justice as the whole of virtue are defined in relation to other people. But justice in the specific sense is concerned with honor, property, safety and similar items, while justice in the larger sense is concerned with **virtue as a whole**. Another subset of justice is distributive justice. Justice (in the narrow sense) is a mean between two extremes of unfairness. What is just in distribution should be in some way according to merit, but not all individuals agree what that merit should be. Advocates of mob rule say that this merit is **freedom**. Oligarchs say that it is **wealth**. Others say that it is **good ancestry**. And aristocrats say that it is **virtue**.

Natural justice is that which is just in all times and places. Conventional justice is that which is made up of laws and customs. All laws are to some extent just, because any law is better than no law. But, laws are always at least slightly flawed in that they must be formulated universally and cannot take into account all specific circumstances. As a result, a judge should rule in accordance with the intention of the lawmaker or the idea behind the law when the law does not seem to properly fit the situation.

Prudence is the intellectual virtue of practical reason. It is concerned with human actions and gives a person the ability to choose what the virtuous mean is in specific situations. Acquiring prudence requires time and experience. Prudence and ethical virtue are both necessary for one another.

Continence and incontinence are concerned with bodily pleasures just like temperance and intemperance, but are distinct from them. The incontinent man is disposed to do what he knows is bad because of his passions. The continent man knows that his desires are bad but does not follow them because of reason. The difference between continence and temperance lies in the fact that for a temperate man his desires are in line with his reason.

Friendship is a necessary part of the good life. There are three types of friendship: friendship based on usefulness, friendship based on pleasure, and friendship based on virtue. Only the last type is genuine friendship. Friendships based on usefulness and pleasure tend not to be very enduring. This is because they only last as long as each party derives the usefulness or pleasure each desires from the relationship. Friendship based on virtue is based on wishing the good for the other person. This genuine friendship is necessary for self-knowledge and helps both of the friends to grow in virtue. Friendship presupposes justice and goes beyond it. The virtue of a friend is to love. The relationship one has with a friend is like the harmonious relationship between the different parts of the soul of a virtuous man.

In spite of what many philosophers may say, pleasure is a good. It perfects actions. The goodness of pleasure is determined by the goodness of the action which it accompanies. The highest good, happiness, must also involve pleasure.

Man's highest action and most complete happiness, according to Aristotle, is a life of contemplation of the highest goods. Man's intellectual capacity is his highest capacity, and therefore his highest happiness resides in the use of that capacity. The life of contemplation is so sublime that it is practically divine. Man can achieve it only insofar as there is something divine in him. Contemplation is the action which best fulfills all the qualifications that the ultimate good should have, because it is the most continuous, complete and self-sufficient of all actions.

For most people, mere exhortation will not be enough to make them act virtuously. Consequently, good laws are necessary in order to make people virtuous. Laws and proper education are necessary, especially for the young, in order to train their passions and desires to be in accord with reason. Yet, since such a great number of men are not virtuous, laws are necessary not just for the young, but for everyone.

GradeSaver. *Biography of Aristotle | List of Works, Study Guides & Essays*. GradeSaver, 23 January 2012 Web. 23 January 2012. <<http://www.gradesaver.com/author/aristotle/>>

The Internet Classics Archive. *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Internet Classics Archive, 23 January 2012 Web. 23 January 2012. <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.1.i.html>>