



The Politics of Aristotle

Aristotle (384 BC - 322 BC)

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Aristotle’s Ethics describes the means to the happy life of virtue intended by nature. In Politics he describes the vital role the political community plays in fostering the well-being of its citizens. In doing so he surveys the types of communities and governments that existed at the time and how many fall short of the ideal, which is a constitutional form with participation by the many. While many of his precepts and goals may seem unusual and outdated today, there is much that stands the test of time, in particular his belief in the need for active participation in politics, in the relationship of the well-being of the people to that of the general community, and his analysis of factors that bring about stability and revolution. Many of the issues raised, notably the importance of the middle class and the role of wealth in a democracy, are as relevant today as they were then.

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Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC) was a Greek scientist and philosopher who may well be the most influential intellectual in history. His work laid the foundations of scientific inquiry, outlined a comprehensive system of philosophical thought, and shaped thinking about poetry and the arts. He was born the son of the physician to the King of Macedon and joined Plato’s Academy in Athens at age 18, where he remained for nearly twenty years until Plato’s death. He then served as tutor to Alexander the Great at the request of his father, Philip of Macedon, which enabled him to establish a library at Lyceum that produced hundreds of books. His thought ranged from the Platonism of his tenure with Plato but moved to a deep immersion in empirical study based on observation and saw perception itself as the basis of knowledge. His writings covered many subjects - biology, zoology, physics, metaphysics, ethics, logic, aesthetics, poetry, music, rhetoric, linguistics, economics, politics and government – in a style described by Cicero as a “river of gold”. Called “the first genuine scientist in history”, many of his views shaped scientific scholarship until the Enlightenment. His study of logic evolved into the discipline of modern formal logic in the 19th century. His ethics have been studied continuously and have gained recent currency with the advent of the study of virtue. His metaphysics continues to influence Christian theology. Although an abundance of material survives, scholars believe that it represents only about a third of his output.