

Brief Outline of the Philosophies of Plato and Aristotle

1. (These were not the only important philosophers of antiquity, but they were the most influential in medieval times.)
2. Plato
 - a. Intellectual biographer of Socrates (along with Xenophon, and others whose works survive only in fragments).
 - b. Socrates adopted from earlier Greek philosophers the distinction between sensation and thought as knowing faculties.
 - c. By means of sensation we cognize sensibles—things that are obvious or manifest.
 - d. But manifest things are not intelligible or coherent in themselves.
 - e. It is clear that there are non-sensible things, such as justice.
 - f. In order to comprehend the causes and principles of things, we must investigate non-sensible things by means of the intellect using logic.
 - g. The causes and principles of things thus reside in the realm of the intelligible, and in fact are eternal patterns of things, called the Forms or the Ideas. Substance, or basic reality, belongs only to the gods and the Forms (and possibly souls).
 - h. Of the intelligibles, Socrates was mainly interested in investigating the “virtues,” human attributes that are good by definition, such as justice, knowledge, and beauty—things we would call ideals.
 - i. Socrates was also a utopian—he was interested in formulating an ideal constitution for a city—one that if instituted would make the city just, and therefore happy.
 - j. According to Socrates, the self is the soul and is immortal. He saw his philosophical inquiry into the nature of virtue as having practical implications for the moral improvement of humanity and as being the most important activity of human life.
3. Aristotle
 - a. Aristotle was a student of Plato in his philosophical school, the Academy.
 - b. He rejected the theory of Forms, along with the division of things into the intelligible and sensible realms.
 - c. However, he retained the distinction between sensation and thought as knowing faculties.
 - d. Aristotle was the first to classify the sciences. Before Plato and Aristotle, mathematics and astronomy were recognizably distinct from philosophy, but not physics, biology, or psychology.
 - e. For Aristotle, philosophy was divided into logic, ethics, physics (including biology and psychology) and first philosophy or theology, which later became known as metaphysics.
 - f. First philosophy was the science of first principles and causes, or the science of being qua being. It was “theology,” because the first principle of all things is God, a pure intellect by whose power the universe remains in motion.

- g. Aristotle believed there were three basic elements—earth, fire, and the celestial substance. Each has its proper place and state of motion. The universe was spherical, and the proper places and states of motion were as follows: earth at the center at rest, fire at the periphery at rest, and the celestial substance over all, in circular motion. Based on this theory he thought that the Earth was at the center of the universe.
- h. Aristotle thought that the universe and the daily rotation of the Heaven (we think of it as the daily rotation of the earth) were everlasting—they never began and would never end. This is a thesis that in the Middle Ages was called “the eternity of the world.” He thought the celestial things like stars were everlasting and imperishable.
- i. God is necessary in his system to move the Heaven everlastingly.
- j. Aristotle also formulated an ethics based on the twin concepts of intellectual and moral virtue. The human good is happiness, which is activity in accordance with virtue in a complete life. Intellectual virtue is divided into theoretical and practical. Practical intellectual virtue, or practical wisdom, is the intellectual ability to achieve happiness. (However, *perfect* happiness is beyond the reach of mortals.) Moral virtue is habitual feeling and acting in harmony with practical wisdom.
- k. Aristotle thought Socrates’ ideal constitution, as set forth in the *Republic*, was unworkable and not in harmony with human nature, and formulated his own political philosophy.
- l. According to Aristotle’s political philosophy, just as for Socrates, the purpose of the state is to bring happiness to its citizens or residents.
- m. Aristotle recognizes several good kinds of constitution, and several bad ones corresponding to them.