

such as Mill's and Kant's to be unrealistically abstract. The proponents of virtue theory join with Aristotle in believing that ethical knowledge involves a degree of wisdom or judgment that cannot be expressed in the form of an absolute rule. Others criticize nonvirtue theories as being too individualistic, arguing that the prominence that Aristotle gave to the social dimension of human life and to community should prevail over individualistic notions of conflict.

For Aristotle, rather than asking the question "What ought I to do?" ethics should be concerned

with answering the question "What should I be?" or, to put it another way, "What character traits should I acquire?" In this view, once we have answered this question, we be in a position to answer the question "What I to do?" Virtue ethics is primarily concerned with the consequences of actions rather than with the character of the actor (Aristotle, 32). Aristotle is mainly interested in virtues—in other words, the strengths or qualities of character that operate to promote or hinder the flourishing of the human person.

A Closer Look

Aristotle

Aristotle, one of history's greatest philosophers, was born in 384 BCE in the north of Greece. His father was a medical doctor and a court physician. Due to his father's position at court, Aristotle formed an early association with the ruling elite. In 367 BCE, Aristotle entered Plato's Academy as a student, and he remained there until Plato's death in 347 BCE. While it seems clear that Aristotle respected and admired Plato, he was not a rigid follower of Plato's teachings, and he developed Plato's philosophy as a springboard from which to develop his own views. In 347 BCE, Aristotle also a tutor to the young Alexander the Great. In 335 BCE, he returned to Athens and founded his own school, the Lyceum. Most of the works of Aristotle that we still possess were written during this period.

When Alexander the Great died in 323 BCE, the people of Athens, who were anti-Macedonian, charged Aristotle with impiety because of his friendly relations with Alexander. In response, Aristotle left Athens rather than having to face a trial. He died the following year.

Most of the works of Aristotle that we possess are treatises, which may have been his own lectures given in the Lyceum. Historically, the *Nicomachean Ethics* has been the subject of numerous lectures and has become more influential than his other works, and it contains his definitive statements on ethics.

Book 1 of the *Ethics* is an investigation of happiness or the good life; he defines this life as the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. The notion of virtue is discussed in depth in Book 2. Book 3 examines the concept of virtue or preference, and Books 4 and 5 consider particular moral virtues. He argues that moral virtues require the virtue of practical wisdom for their proper exercise, and he examines this in Book 6. Moral weakness, which is a failure of practical wisdom, is examined in Book 7. Books 8 and 9 concern friendship, and Book 10, the concluding book, is concerned with pleasure and the reconsideration of the good life.

SOURCE: Prior 1991: 144–146.