

1. **Books**

Irwin and Fine: *Aristotle: Selections*
Barnes, ed.: *Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*

2. **Syllabus:** available online at <http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/433>

Course will be a survey of several of the more important aspects of Aristotle's thought. (Much will *not* be covered: e.g., ethics, politics, rhetoric. Other courses in dept. and U. cover these.)

3. My **office hours:** Tu 2:00-3:00, and by appointment. Condon 608. Any time by email.

4. **Course Requirements:**

a. **Written work:**

No exams

Papers: one term paper (10-12 pages) on a topic of your choice, appropriately related to the topics and issues treated in the course (see course Web page for details).

Selecting a topic: read widely in the secondary literature. There's an excellent bibliography in the *Companion*. I have also put a different (and overlapping) bibliography on the course Web page.

b. **Class participation:**

Come to class prepared to discuss the topic or text for the day. This means reading the relevant text (and discussion in secondary literature, where appropriate) in advance. Come to class with a question you'd like to pursue: something in the reading that you didn't understand, or disagreed with, or want to pursue further.

c. **Course web site:**

<http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/433>

Items currently available on Web page: syllabus, course description, a couple of sets of lecture notes (**not** for complete course!), some handouts for you to print

out, links to some texts of Aristotle (both Greek and English), other philosophy links.

d. **Class discussion list:**

phil433a_wi08@u.washington.edu

To send a message to the **entire** class, use this address. Do **not** use it to send mail just to me, or to just one or two other class members.

5. **Approaches to studying the history of philosophy**

- a. The **History of Ideas** approach: discovering which of Aristotle's ideas were original and which were derived from others; tracing those origins; tracing Aristotle's influences on subsequent thinkers.
- b. The *Verstehen* approach (Leo Strauss): to understand the thought of a remote historical figure, we must (literally) think his thoughts. We cannot put them into our terms; we must come to understand him in his own terms. We must accept his whole framework; within this framework, everything he says is literally *true*. There is no possibility of his being mistaken—everything he says defines for us what his position consists in. Apparent contradictions (if they exist) are to be worked out and explained away—they represent our own failures of understanding, not an inconsistency in the historical figure. This may sound like a crazy approach, but it is actually just a version of the next one, run amok.
- c. The **“principle of charity”**: whenever possible, give the philosopher you're interpreting the benefit of the doubt. That is, when it's unclear which of two different propositions Aristotle means to assert, I'm more inclined to attribute to him the more plausible proposition. But it's a huge step from “benefit of the doubt” to blind allegiance, as in the *verstehen* approach.
- d. The **Contemporary Relevance** approach: poke around in Aristotle's texts until you find something that seems to bear on a problem that philosophers nowadays are interested in. Use contemporary methods of analysis and techniques in examining the texts you are working with. Find currently popular theses and doctrines expressed (albeit in a primitive way) in those texts. Ignore those parts of his thought that seem strange, quaint, or obscure by contemporary standards. In general, try to discover his position on all of today's leading philosophical problems.

6. Difficulties with these approaches

(a) is an arid and pointless exercise, from which we learn nothing about what our figure thought or why he thought it.

(b) is impossible to do (what are the criteria of success in attempting to think Aristotle's thoughts?) and contains absurd assumptions (e.g., that everything Aristotle said was literally true, within his own system—Aristotle could have been mistaken in much of what he said, even by his own lights. Not everything one says *defines* one's own system of beliefs).

(c) goes too far if not tempered by a corresponding “principle of parsimony.” There must be some historically justifiable reason to attribute a belief to an historical figure; it is not enough that it is a plausible belief that would make his overall view more palatable.

(d) is intellectual dilettantism, and lazy, to boot. It distorts historical figures for the sake of making them seem appealing to those contemporary philosophers who see no value in studying the history of philosophy. It is an overreaction to the vices of (a) and (b).

The right approach, as Aristotle would have liked to say, is a mean between extremes. We may use contemporary techniques and idiom to help us understand Aristotle, but we cannot put our words into his mouth. We do have to try to understand what his concerns were, even when those are foreign to us.

So there will be elements of all three of these extremes in the approach I will take. My main aim will be to try to convey an appreciation of the greatness of Aristotle as a philosopher, but also to take issue with him and probe his thought for weakness and inconsistency.

7. Two Views of Aristotle as a Philosopher

- a. **The system builder:** Aristotle traditionally has been seen as attempting to construct a unified and systematic world-view, encompassing all human knowledge.
- b. **The piecemeal puzzle-solver:** A more recent interpretation holds that Aristotle had a different approach. He set puzzles and tried to solve them; he approached philosophical problems individually and tried to solve them individually, not by trying to fit a solution into a grand scheme.

Which is the right view? First, a sociological-historical note: the systematic interpretation has a long tradition; during the 1960's and 70's, system-building in philosophy fell into disfavor, so those who wished to keep Aristotle as their

hero were motivated to see him as one of the new breed of piecemeal problem-solvers.

The evidence cuts both ways.

- In favor of (a): *An. Pst.* presentation of the sciences as axiomatic systems. Aristotle seems to embrace the ideal of arranging all human knowledge in a network of axiomatized systems. This certainly makes him seem like a system builder.

In favor of (b):

- When discussing an individual science (physics, biology), Aristotle never sets it out axiomatically.
- *Met. B*: a collection of puzzles; rest of *Met.* deals with them tentatively, not systematically.

Still, in favor of (a), there is something orderly and unified about Aristotle's work, even when it is aporetic. He employs the same unified system of concepts: *matter, form, substance, essence, accident, definition, genus, species*, etc.

Aristotle's Life

Aristotle was born in Macedonia (northern Greece) in 384 BCE. (Plato was 43 at the time; Socrates had died 15 years earlier.) His father, Nicomachus, was a physician who died when Aristotle was young. Aristotle's guardian, Proxenus, sent him to Athens to Plato's Academy in 367-6, when Aristotle was 17 or 18.

At Plato's death in 347, the Academy came under the control of Speusippus, and Aristotle left Athens. (Perhaps the reasons for his leaving were political, rather than philosophical—Demosthenes and the anti-Macedonian forces had just come to power in Athens the year before.) Aristotle went to Atarneus, in Asia Minor, where his friend Hermias was the ruler. Hermias provided for all his needs, and Aristotle and his friends were able to devote themselves to philosophy. Aristotle married Hermias's niece, Pythias, with whom he had a daughter—also named Pythias.

After a few years he moved to the nearby island of Lesbos, where he met Theophrastus, who was to become his greatest associate and pupil. In 342, King Philip summoned Aristotle to Macedon to serve as tutor to his son Alexander, then 13 years old (later to become "the Great"). When Alexander became king in 336, Aristotle began his second long stay in Athens. He established his own school, the Lyceum.

While Aristotle was in Athens, Pythias died, and Aristotle subsequently married (or at least cohabited with) a woman named Herpyllis (also a Stagirite). They had a son, Nicomachus (named after Aristotle's father, and for whom the *Nicomachean Ethics* is named).

Alexander died in 323, leading to a revolution in Athens. Aristotle was accused of impiety (the same charge that was leveled against Socrates and for which Socrates was executed) and fled to Chalcis (his mother's birthplace) "lest the Athenians sin twice against philosophy." He died the following year at the age of 62.

Aristotle's Works

1. While in Plato's Academy, he wrote some dialogues, and also what are sometimes called his "exoteric" works (i.e., intended for a general reading audience). None have survived.
2. The "esoteric" works (intended for his own students and associates): these are scientific and philosophical treatises; they are, for the most part, not polished pieces of prose. They are frequently obscure in expression and difficult to read.
 - a. They are probably lecture notes (not, as has often been suggested, notes taken by a B- student, but Aristotle's *own* notes from which he lectured) or, perhaps, text-books for the school.
 - b. How much of Aristotle's work has survived is unclear. Some historians think that all, or nearly all, of Aristotle's esoteric works have survived. Others think that we have only a small fraction of his output (perhaps a fourth or a fifth).
 - c. Their present order and structure is not entirely, perhaps not even largely, due to Aristotle. The *Metaphysics*, e.g., was collected together (out of authentic Aristotelian parts) and organized into a whole by Andronicus of Rhodes (first century B.C.).
 - d. Most of the surviving work concerns biological matters, principally zoology, the study of animals. Aristotle's zoological interest was of paramount importance, and influenced his philosophical thought, as we'll see.

The Development of Aristotle's Thought

1. The traditional view is an elaboration of the system-builder interpretation. The corpus as we have it is a coherent whole expressing Aristotle's mature thought. It was written mostly after 335 BCE—i.e., long after Aristotle left the Academy and the influence of Plato's thought.
2. Two different “developmental” pictures have succeeded the “unitarian” view:
 - a. Werner Jaeger: Aristotle's work can be divided into three periods.
 1. Until 347: Platonism
 2. 347-335: Criticism of Plato
 3. After 335: Rejection of metaphysics, adoption of empiricism

[Jaeger's work was epochal because it was the first “developmental” break with the traditional unitarian picture. Its details have since been roundly criticized.]
 - b. Ingemar Düring: Aristotle was an empiricist *early* in his career, and gradually moved closer to Platonism.
3. Even the common idea that Aristotle had a thorough knowledge of Plato and his thought has been challenged. It has been argued (Ryle) that Aristotle seemed to have only a superficial knowledge of Plato's work, and of only *some* of the dialogues; in his own writings, Aristotle says nothing of Plato the man.

We will not try to settle these mainly historical issues. Fascinating though they may be, the evaluation and appreciation of Aristotle the philosopher does not turn on their resolution.