



Biographical Briefing on Aristotle

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play Aristotle and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Aristotle was born in 384 B.C. in Stagira, a small township in northern Greece. His father, a physician at the royal court of Macedonia, died while his son was still young. Aristotle then left Stagira to study at Plato's Academy in Athens. For the next 20 years, Aristotle studied with Plato, a renowned Greek philosopher, and the circle of philosophers at the Academy. After Plato's death in 347 B.C., Aristotle left the Academy and traveled in Greece and Asia Minor, writing and studying in academic circles. His writing covers a wide range of subjects: logic, physics, astronomy, biology, ethics, politics, rhetoric (public speaking), and literary criticism. In 342 B.C., King Philip of Macedonia asked Aristotle to become the tutor of Philip's son, Alexander, who later became the conqueror Alexander the Great. When Alexander became king, Aristotle left Macedonia and returned to Athens, where he began his own school named the Lyceum. After Alexander's death in 323 B.C., the Athenians became hostile to Macedonian rule. Because of his connections with Alexander and the Macedonian government, Aristotle fled Athens in 324 B.C. in fear for his life. Aristotle died the next year on the island of Euboea.



- **Where did Aristotle study as a young man?**
- **What subjects did he examine in his writing?**
- **Why did Aristotle leave Athens towards the end of his life?**

Aristotle considered language and speech to be critically important since the ability to reason comes from the use of language. Reason, Aristotle claimed, is what distinguishes humans from animals. Aristotle thought that people are not born virtuous (good, morally excellent), but learn to be good. Parents teach children right from wrong by punishing them for wrong actions. It is through reason, he proposed, that children learn to separate right from wrong and are able to learn moral values. Aristotle believed that over time, humankind has evolved to higher and higher forms of development. The development of the *polis* (political community or society) represents the highest stage in this development. People exercising reason can join together in societies through their understanding that the common good is more important than individual good. In the absence of society and law and order, Aristotle thought, humans become selfish and evil. Yet when unified in a *polis*, humans can be the best of all creatures. Aristotle believed that only through society and government can people realize their full potential.



- **What makes humans different from animals, according to Aristotle?**
- **According to Aristotle, are people naturally good? Explain.**
- **How, did he argue, can people best realize their potential?**

In his work *Politics*, Aristotle described three positive forms of government: monarchy (rule by a king or queen), aristocracy (rule by the noble or wealthy class), and constitutional rule (rule by the people). He believed that monarchy and aristocracy are good forms of government as long as the rulers are virtuous. If the rulers are not virtuous, monarchy and aristocracy can become negative and dangerous. This happens when rulers selfishly use their power to increase their own wealth, rather than to foster (support) the common good. Aristotle believed that democracy is the least dangerous form of government. His main concern with democracy was that because people have equal freedom, they might think they are equal in every way and fail to recognize their different strengths and weaknesses. Since some people are better educated and more suited to have political power, Aristotle argued that a belief in total equality would harm the society in general.



- **What did Aristotle name as the three positive forms of government?**
- **When did he think monarchy and aristocracy become dangerous?**
- **What did Aristotle believe is the possible danger of democracy?**

Aristotle believed that the ideal society is one in which everyone is educated to be morally virtuous, and all citizens participate in political society. He thought that the best form of government would be rule by properly educated members of the middle class. Power, he believed, should be given to the middle class because people in this class are free of the excesses found in the upper and lower classes. He thought that while the rich are too arrogant (prideful) and the poor may be vengeful (wanting revenge), the middle class can more easily be stable and rational. However, he also realized that this ideal is almost impossible to achieve. In his time, kings held most of the power, so Aristotle favored a system where kings would take advice on ruling from philosophers. He wrote in *On Kingship*, “[It is] not merely unnecessary for a king to be a philosopher, but even a disadvantage. Rather a king should take advantage of true philosophers. Then he would fill his reign with good deeds, not with good words.” By separating the philosophers from direct rule, Aristotle hoped to keep the philosophers independent in spirit. He felt that if the philosophers could not become wealthy from a position of direct power, they would be more honest.



- **What did Aristotle believe the relationship should be between kings and philosophers?**
- **What did he believe is the best form of government?**
- **Why are members of the middle class best able to govern?**