

# Aristotle's Psychology

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## The History of Psychology

The beginning of the history of psychology is hard to pinpoint, mainly because it is difficult to establish exactly what psychology is.

Since the dawn of civilization and the establishment of the earliest religions and spiritual beliefs, various priests, shamans and spiritual leaders were responsible for the mental wellbeing of their people. From shamen to Jewish Qabbalists, curing the mind was a huge part of the spiritual path, even if treatment was couched in magic and mystery, using rituals to drive out demons.

If we define psychology as a formal study of the mind and a more systematic approach to understanding and curing mental conditions, then the Ancient Greeks were certainly leading proponents. As with many scientific studies, Aristotle was at the forefront of developing the foundations of the history of psychology. Aristotle's psychology, as would be expected, was intertwined with his philosophy of the mind, reasoning and Nicomachean ethics, but the psychological method started with his brilliant mind and empirical approach.

Of course, it would be unfair to concentrate fully on Aristotle's psychology without studying some of the other great thinkers who contributed to the history of psychology, but his work certainly is the basis of modern methods. Any modern psychologist of note fully understands the basics of Aristotelian thought and recognizes his contribution to the history of psychology.

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## Aristotle's Psychology and the Influence of Plato

To give Aristotle (384 BC - 322 BC) complete credit for being the first thinker to develop a theory of proto-psychology is unfair to some of the other philosophers from Greece and beyond. However, whilst there is little doubt that the Babylonians and Buddhists, amongst others, developed concepts involving the mind, thought and reasoning, much of their tradition was passed on orally and is lost. For this reason, the Ancient Greeks provide a useful starting point as we delve into the history of psychology.

The teacher of Aristotle, Plato (428/427 BC - 348/347 BC), provided some useful insights into the theoretical structure of the human mind, based largely upon his elegant Theory of Forms. He used the idea of a psyche, a word used to describe both the mind and the soul, to develop a rough framework of human behavior, reasoning and impulses.

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Plato (Public Domain)

Plato proposed that the human psyche was the seat of all knowledge and that the human mind was imprinted with all of the knowledge it needed. As a result, learning was a matter of unlocking and utilizing this inbuilt knowledge, a process he called anamnesis.

In his famous work, 'The Republic,' Plato further developed this idea and first proposed the idea that the mind consisted of three interwoven parts, called the Tripartite Mind.

- **The Logistikon:** This was the intellect, the seat of reasoning and logic.
- **The Thumos:** This was the spiritual centre of the mind, and dictated emotions [1] and feelings.
- **The Epithumetikon:** This part governed desires and appetites.

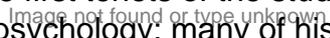
According to Plato, the healthy mind discovered a balance between the three parts, and an over reliance upon these parts led to the expression of personality. For example, gluttony and selfishness could be explained by a dominance of the Epithumetikon, letting desires govern behavior.

In the Republic, a treatise aimed at theorizing the perfect society, Plato proposed that the rulers of such a society, those who determined course and policy, should be drawn from men where the Logistikon held sway. Individuals with a strong Epithumetikon made excellent

merchants and acquirers of wealth whilst the Thumos, which can loosely identified with will and courage, was the domain of the soldier.

Later, Plato renounced his idea of a tripartite mind and returned to earlier proposals of a dualistic explanation for the mind, balanced between intellect and desire. However, this three way split would reemerge in Aristotle's idea of a trinity of souls and, based upon the idea prevalent in many societies and religions, which gave a reverence to the number three, 20th Century psychoanalysts maintained the idea of a human mind balanced between three impulses.

## Aristotle's Psychology - Para Psyche

Aristotle, building upon the work of the earlier philosophers and their studies into mind, reasoning and thought, wrote the first known text in the history of psychology, called Para Psyche, 'About the Mind.' In this landmark work, he laid out the first tenets of the study of reasoning that would determine the direction of the history of psychology; many of his proposals continue to influence modern psychologists.   Aristotle (Creative Commons [2])

In the book, the definition of psyche, as was common at the time, used 'mind' and 'soul' interchangeably, with the Ancient Greek philosophers feeling no need to make no distinction between the two. At this period, apart from dalliances with Atheism from Theodorus, Greek philosophers took the existence of divine influence as given. Only Socrates really questioned whether human behavior and the need to be a 'good person' was about seeking personal happiness rather than placating a divine will.

In Para Psyche, Aristotle's psychology proposed that the mind was the 'first entelechy,' or primary reason for the existence and functioning of the body. This line of thought was heavily influenced by Aristotle's zoology, where he proposed that there were three types of souls defining life; the plant soul, the animal soul and the human soul, which gave humanity the unique ability to reason and create. Interestingly, this human soul was the ultimate link with the divine and Aristotle believed that mind and reason could exist independently of the body.

He was one of the first minds to examine the urges and impulse that drove and defined life, believing that the libido and urge to reproduce was the overriding impulse of all living things, influenced by the 'plant soul.' Whilst he partially linked this to the process of achieving immortality and fulfilling the purposes of a divine mind, he proposed this reproductive urge many centuries before Darwin. This idea is a fine example of one of the great intuitive mental leaps that define Aristotle's legacy.

## Aristotle's Psychology of Impulses and Urges

Continuing this line of thought, Aristotle attempted to address the relationships between impulses and urges within the human mind, many years before Freud resurrected many of the basic tenets of Aristotle's psychology with his psychoanalysis theory. Aristotle believed that, alongside the 'Libido,' were 'Id' and 'Ego,' the idea of desire and reason, two forces that determined actions.

Aristotle's psychology proposed that allowing desire to dominate reason would lead to an unhealthy imbalance and the tendency to perform bad actions. Here, Aristotle's thought

created a paradigm that remained unchallenged for centuries and one that still underpins the work of modern psychology and philosophy, where desire is renamed as emotion and reason as rationality.

Uniquely, Aristotle also understood the importance of time on the actions driving a person, with desire concerned with the present and reason more concerned with the future and long-term consequences. As an aside and a slight divergence into sociology, this short-termism and quest for immediate results is one of the driving forces behind economic collapses, environmental degradation and political populism.

Perhaps more people should study Aristotle and his ideas of what drives human behavior. Aristotle can, quite legitimately, be called the first behaviorist and the basis of work by B.F. Skinner [3] and Pavlov [4], two of the most famous names in the history of psychology.

Aristotle's psychology included a study into the formation of the human mind, as one of the first salvos in the debate between nature and nurture that influences many academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology, education, politics and human geography. Aristotle, unlike Plato, was a believer in nurture, stating that the human mind was blank at birth and that educating the individual and exposing them to experiences would define the formation of the mind and build a store of knowledge.

## **The History of Psychology and Ancient Greek Medicine**

Plato and Aristotle adopted a philosophical and abstract approach to defining human behavior and the structure of the mind, but that was not the only contribution of the Hellenistic philosophers. The development of Ancient Greek medicine introduced the study of physiology into the history of psychology, proposing that there were physical reasons underlying many mental ailments. Chief amongst these was the Father of Medicine, Hippocrates, who proposed that epilepsy had a physical cause and was not some curse sent by the fickle Greek Gods.

Unlike Aristotle, who saw the heart as the seat of thought and reason, Hippocrates understood the importance of the brain. This debate continued, with physicians such as Praxagoras still maintaining that the heart and arteries linked thought, through a mysterious fluid called pneuma. In a gruesome experiment, Herophilus and Erasistratus were given permission, by the ruler of Alexandria, Egypt, to perform vivisection on criminals and they determined that the nervous system and brain controlled the body and were therefore the seat of reason.

However, they still believed that the heart sent pneuma throughout the body, but that it controlled unconscious processes, such as metabolism. By contrast, the nerves sent 'psychic' pneuma throughout the body. These experiments revealed a lot of information but introduced medical ethics into the history of psychology, a debate that rages today. Whilst their studies were abhorrent when looked at through the lens of history, the Twentieth Century history of psychology includes some infamous and unwanted landmarks.

## **The History of Psychology - Galen and the Four Humours**

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Following on from Hippocrates was the physician Galen, who provided the link between the Greeks and Islamic psychology. Of Greek extraction, this brilliant physician and researcher earned the respect of successive Roman emperors for his skill and ability, and he went on to produce volumes of work covering many aspects of the human condition, from psychology to anatomy.

Lithograph by Pierre Roche Vigner. (Paris: Lith de Gregoire et Deneux, ca. 1865) (Public Domain)

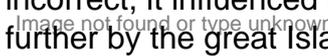
He proposed the idea of four 'humours' within the human body, each responsible for a different aspect of the human condition, and believed that an imbalance between the four would affect physical and mental wellbeing. This holistic approach to medicine inextricably linked mind and body, a factor only recently readopted by modern medicine, which tends to treat physical conditions and symptoms without paying much regard to mental health, and vice-versa.

### Galen's Four Humors Were:

- **Sanguine:** The blood, related to the element of air and the liver, dictated courage, hope and love.
- **Choleric:** Yellow bile, related to the element of fire and the Gall Bladder, could lead to bad temper and anger, in excess.
- **Melancholic:** Black bile, associated with the element of earth and the spleen, would lead to sleeplessness and irritation, if it dominated the body.
- **Phlegmatic:** Phlegm, associated with the element of water and the brain, was responsible for rationality, but would dull the emotions if allowed to become dominant.

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Galen believed that the balance of these four humours would be influenced by location, diet, occupation, geography and a range of other factors. Whilst this idea of humours was incorrect, it influenced medical and psychological thought for centuries, and it was developed further by the great Islamic scholar, Ibn-Sina (Avicenna).

Galen Manuscript

*De pulsibus* by Galen. (Manuscript; Venice, ca. 1550). This Greek manuscript of Galen's treatise on the pulse is interweaved with a Latin translation. (Public Domain)

This idea of looking at the entire body and mind, rather than blaming witchcraft and spirits, certainly influenced medicine and the history of psychology for the better although some of the cures used to alleviate the build-up of a humour, such as blood-letting, were harmful.

Of course, to modern commentators, the idea of the humors seems a little primitive and is based upon a limited knowledge of psychology. However, the importance of Galen is not the exact nature of the theory but the fact that his ideas saw the first paradigm shift away from the idea of mental conditions having a supernatural source and towards finding answers in physiology.

It is no surprises that his work upon psychology and the mind, as well as other disciplines, became the backbone of the Islamic rediscovery of the Greeks; his ideas were copied and added to by Islamic scholars. Certainly, his empirical and pragmatic approach earns him a place in the history of psychology.

# The Coming of the Islamic Golden Age and the Growth of Psychology

There is little doubt that the Ancient Greeks laid out the course of modern psychology, although due respect has to be given to the Chinese, Indian and Persian scholars who made contributions outside the scope of this history of psychology, but which influenced modern thought in many disparate ways.

The Islamic expansion saw a culmination of this process and an integration of Greek thought allied to the wisdom of the Middle-Eastern and Eastern scholars as they drew knowledge from around the known world. The Islamic Golden Age would preserve Aristotle's psychology, add to it, and pass it on to the Europeans as the Dark Ages ended. The roots of the history of psychology certainly began here and the beliefs of the Greeks would also influence sociology, geography and economic theory.

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## Links

- [1] <https://staging.explorables.com/nature-of-emotions>
- [2] <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Sting>
- [3] <https://staging.explorables.com/operant-conditioning>
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