explanation, and don't provide any insight into meaning or value. According to existentialism, as humans, we should come to terms with this fact and realize that the ability to understand the world is impossible to achieve. The world has no meaning other than the meaning that we provide it.

Furthermore, if an individual makes a choice, it is based on a reason. However, since one can never truly understand meaning, the reasoning is absurd, and so too is the decision to follow through with the choice.

RELIGION AND EXISTENTIALISM

While there are some very famous Christian and Jewish philosophers who use existentialist themes in their work, on the whole, existentialism is commonly associated with atheism. This does not mean that all atheists are necessarily existentialists; rather, those who subscribe to existentialist thought are often atheists.

Why is this the case? Existentialism does not set out to prove that God does or does not exist. Rather, the main ideas and themes of existentialism (such as complete freedom) simply do not mesh well with the notion of there being an omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being. Even those existentialists who maintain a belief in a higher being agree that religion is suspicious. Existentialism asks human beings to search and discover their meaning and purpose from within themselves, and this is not possible if they believe in some external force controlling humanity.

ARISTOTLE (384–322 B.C.)

Wisdom starts with understanding yourself

Aristotle was born around 384 B.C. Though little is known about his mother, Aristotle's father was court physician to the Macedonian king Amyntas II (the connection and affiliation with the Macedonian court would continue to play an important role throughout Aristotle's life). Both of Aristotle's parents died when he was young, and at the age of seventeen, Aristotle's guardian sent him to Athens to pursue a higher education. It was in Athens that Aristotle would enroll in Plato's Academy and study under Plato. He would remain there for the next twenty years, studying with Plato as both a student and colleague.

When Plato died in 347 B.C., many believed Aristotle would take his place as director of the Academy. However, by that time, Aristotle had differing views on several of Plato's works (for example, he disagreed with Plato's theory of Forms), and Aristotle was not offered the position.

In 338 B.C., Aristotle returned to Macedonia and began tutoring the thirteen-year-old son of King Philip II, Alexander (later known as "the Great"). When, in 335 B.C., Alexander became king and conquered Athens, Aristotle returned to Athens. While Plato's Academy (which was now directed by Xenocrates) was still the major school in the city, Aristotle decided to create his own school, the Lyceum.

With the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C., the government was overthrown and anti-Macedonian sentiment was high. Facing charges of impiety, Aristotle fled Athens to avoid being prosecuted and remained on the island of Euboea until his death in 322 B.C.

LOGIC

While Aristotle focused on many different subjects, one of his most significant contributions to the world of philosophy and Western thought was his creation of logic. To Aristotle, the process of learning could be placed into three distinct categories: theoretical, practical, and productive. Logic, however, did not belong to any one of these categories.

Instead, logic was a tool used to attain knowledge, and was therefore the very first step in the learning process. Logic enables us to discover errors and establish truths.

In his book, *Prior Analytics*, Aristotle introduced the notion of the syllogism, which turned out to be one of the most important contributions to the field of logic. A syllogism is a type of reasoning whereby a conclusion can be deduced based on a series of specific premises or assumptions.

For example:

- All Greek people are human.
- All humans are mortal.
- Therefore, all Greek people are mortal.

To further break down what a syllogism is, one can summarize it in the following way:

- If all X are Y, and all Y are Z, then all X are Z.

Syllogisms are made up of three propositions: the first two are premises; the last is the conclusion. Premises can either be universal (using words like *every*, *all*, or *no*) or particular (for example, using the word *some*), and they can also be affirmative or negative.

Aristotle then set out to create a set of rules that would produce a valid inference. One classic example is:

- At least one premise has to be universal.
- At least one premise has to be affirmative.
- If one of the premises is negative, the conclusion will be negative.

For example:

- No dogs are birds.
- Parrots are birds.
- Therefore, no dogs are parrots.

Aristotle believed three rules applied to all valid thoughts:

1. **The law of identity:** This law states that X is X, and this holds true because X has certain characteristics. A tree is a tree because we can see the leaves, the trunk, the branches, and so on. A tree does not have another identity other than a tree. Therefore, everything that exists has its own characteristics true to itself.

2. **The law of noncontradiction:** This law states X can't be X and not X simultaneously. A statement can never be true and false at the exact same time. If this were the case, a contradiction would arise. If you were to say you fed the cat yesterday and then say you did not feed the cat yesterday, there is a contradiction.

3. **The law of the excluded middle:** This law claims a statement can be either true or false; there cannot be middle ground. This law also claims something has to either be true or be false. If you say your hair is blond, the statement is either true or false. However, later philosophers and mathematicians would dispute this law.

METAPHYSICS

Aristotle rejected Plato's theory of Forms. Instead, Aristotle's response to understanding the nature of being was metaphysics (though he never used this word, instead calling it "first philosophy").

While Plato saw a difference between the intelligible world (made up of thoughts and ideas) and the sensible world (made up of what could visibly be seen) and believed the intelligible world was the only true form of reality, Aristotle believed separating the two would remove all meaning. Instead, Aristotle believed the world was made up of substances that could either be form, matter, or both, and that intelligibility was present in all things and beings.

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is composed of fourteen books that were later grouped together by editors. It is considered to be one of the greatest works ever produced on the subject of philosophy. Aristotle believed that knowledge was made up of specific truths that people gain from experience, as well as the truths that arise from science and art. Wisdom, as opposed to knowledge, is when one understands the fundamental principles that govern all things (these are the most general truths) and then translates this information into scientific expertise.

Aristotle breaks down how things come to be through four causes:

1. **The material cause:** This explains what something is made of.
2. **The formal cause:** This explains what form something takes.
3. **The efficient cause:** This explains the process of how something comes into being.
4. **The final cause:** This explains the purpose something serves.

While other sciences might study reasons for a particular manifestation of being (for example, a biologist would study humans with regard to them being organisms, while a psychologist would study humans as beings with consciousness), metaphysics examines the reason why there is being in the first place. For this reason, metaphysics is often described as "the study of being qua being" (*qua* is Latin for "in so far as").

VIRTUE

Another one of Aristotle's most impactful works was *Ethics*. According to Aristotle, the purpose of ethics is to discover the purpose of life. Aristotle comes to realize that happiness is the ultimate and final good and that people pursue good things in order to achieve happiness. Aristotle claimed that the way to attain happiness (and therefore the very purpose of life) is through virtue.

Virtue requires both choice and habit. Unlike other ways to attain happiness, such as pleasure or honor, with virtue, when an individual makes a decision, the decision comes from that individual's disposition, which is determined by that person's past choices.

A virtuous choice is, then, the mean between the two most extreme choices. Between acting cold to someone and being overly subservient or attentive is the virtuous choice, friendliness.

To Aristotle, the ultimate type of happiness is living a life of intellectual contemplation, and using reason (which is what separates humans from other animals) is the highest form of virtue. However, for one to achieve such a level of virtue, a person needs the proper social environment, and a proper social environment can only be attained by an appropriate government.