



# GREEK PHILOSOPHY

Who are we? How can we be happy? Does the universe have a purpose? Greek philosophers approached the big questions of life sometimes in a genuinely scientific way, sometimes in mystic ways, but always in an imaginative fashion. Pythagoras considered a charlatan for claiming the doctrine of reincarnation, a half-naked Socrates haranguing people in the street with provocative[1] and unanswerable questions, Aristotle tutoring great generals: these are examples of how Greek thinkers dared to question traditional conventions and to challenge the prejudices of their age, sometimes putting their own lives at stake. Greek Philosophy as an independent cultural genre began around 600 B.C., and its insights still persist to our times.

## The Pre-Socratics

About 600 B.C., the Greek cities of Ionia were the intellectual and cultural leaders of Greece and the number one sea-traders of the Mediterranean. Miletus, the southernmost Ionian city, was the wealthiest of Greek cities and the main focus of the “Ionian awakening,” a name for the initial phase of classical Greek civilization, coincidental with the birth of Greek philosophy.

The first group of Greek philosophers is a triad of Milesian thinkers: Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes. Their main concern was to come up with a cosmological theory purely based on natural phenomena. Their approach required the rejection of all traditional explanations based on religious authority, dogma, myth and superstition. They all agreed on the notion that all things come from a single “primal substance”: Thales believed it was water; Anaximander said it was a substance different from all other known substances, “infinite, eternal and ageless”; and Anaximenes claimed it was air.

Observation was important among the Milesian school. Thales predicted an eclipse which took place in 585 B.C. and it seems he had been able to calculate the distance of a ship at sea from observations taken at two points. Anaximander, based on the fact that human infants are helpless at birth, argued that if the first human had somehow appeared on earth as an infant, it would not have survived: therefore, humans have evolved from other animals whose offspring are fitter. The science among Milesians was stronger than their philosophy and somewhat crude, but it encouraged observation in many subsequent thinkers. It also proved a good stimulus for approaching in a rational fashion many of the traditional questions that had previously been answered through religion and superstition. The Ionian rational view caused nothing but perplexity among some of their powerful neighbors such as the Babylonians and Egyptians, which were nations based on theocratic governments where religion played an important political and social role.

Pythagoras is considered one of the Ionian thinkers but outside the Milesian school: he was originally from Samos, an offshore Ionian settlement. His approach combines science with religious beliefs, something that would have caused horror among the Milesian school. His philosophy has a dose of mysticism, probably an influence of the Orphic tradition. Mathematics, in the sense of demonstrative deductive arguments, begins with Pythagoras: he is credited as the author of the first known mathematical formulation, the theorem which states that the square of the longest side of a right triangle equals the sum of the squares of the other two sides. Deductive reasoning from general premises seems to have been a Pythagorean innovation.

Atomism began with Leucippus and Democritus. Among the ancient schools, this approach is the closest to modern science: they believed that everything is composed of atoms, which are indestructible and physically indivisible. They were strict determinists, who believed that everything happens in accordance with natural laws, and the universe, they said, has no purpose and is nothing more than a mixture of infinite atoms being

shuffled and re-shuffled according to the indifferent rules of nature. What is interesting about this school is that it attempted to understand the universe as objectively as possible and minimize intellectual deviations in favor of cultural and mystic prejudices.

### The Rise of Athens: The Sophists and Socrates

About 500 B.C., the Greek city-states or poleis were still largely divided. They had a common language and culture, but they were very often rivals. Some years earlier, Athens implemented a socio-political innovation by which all free male citizens had equal rights regardless of their origin and fortune. They named it democracy. Before the time of democracy, government decision-making was in the hands of a few, often aristocratic and noble families. Democracy allowed all free citizens to be part of the important decisions of the polis. They could engage in the discussions held during deliberative assembly and tribunals, their voices could be heard everywhere and had the same value as any other voice. In this context, speech was king: being able to discuss different topics effectively and to persuade others, granted a competitive advantage. This was true not only of citizens actively involved in politics, but for any other citizen. During court hearings, for example, prosecutor and accused had to appear in court in person, never through lawyers, and the failure or success of the process relied largely on rhetorical skills and any citizen could be subject to a court hearing. This period, therefore, saw the beginning of the Sophist school.

The Sophists were intellectuals who taught courses in various topics, including rhetoric, a useful skill in Athens. Because they taught in return for a fee, the Sophists' schools were only attended by those who could afford it, usually members of the aristocracy and wealthy families. This was a time of profound political and social change in Athens: democracy had replaced the old way of doing politics and many aristocrats whose interests were affected were trying to destroy the democracy; the rapid increase of wealth and culture, mainly due to foreign commerce, undermined traditional beliefs and morals. In a way, the Sophists represented the new political era in Athenian life, especially because they were linked with the new educational needs.

Caught in the clash between cultural conservatism and innovation, we find a peculiar character: Socrates, the pivotal figure in Greek philosophy and the wisest among Greeks at his time according to the oracle of Delphi. Like the Sophists, Socrates enjoyed teaching, but unlike the Sophists he never requested a fee in return and lived a life of austerity. He either underestimated or ignored most of the topics that were popular among his predecessors. Before the time of Socrates, philosophers' main concern had been the physical world and how to explain it naturally. However, Socrates set in motion a new approach by focusing entirely on moral and psychological questions. His methodology sought to define key questions such as: what is virtue? what is patriotism? what do you mean by morality? As a result of this, most of his debates ended up with even more questions, the central issue unanswered, and the disputers' ignorance on many topics revealed, since he invariably proved that the words being used by his contenders were actually abstract terms with an empty meaning.

By combining a humble spirit (he never claimed to be any wiser than anyone else) and a strict agnosticism (he said he knew nothing) with a method that challenged conventional assumptions and intolerance for unclear thinking, Socrates gradually earned enemies from various sectors of Athenian society. He was, consequently, put on trial and condemned to death. However, Athenians did not like to condemn a citizen to death, therefore, this was merely a formal sentence and he was offered the possibility to escape. He refused to do so and obeyed the jury's decision: a mixture containing poison hemlock took away his life, but his example granted him immortality.

### Plato & Aristotle

Plato and Aristotle are the two most important Greek philosophers. Their work has been the main focus of interest for students of philosophy and specialists. This is partly because, unlike most of their predecessors, what they wrote survived in an accessible form and partly because Christian thought, which was the dominant thought in the Western world during the Middle Ages and early modern age, contained a high dose of Platonic and Aristotelian influence.

Plato was a student of Socrates who left Athens disgusted by the death of his teacher. After travelling for many years, he returned to Athens and opened his famous Academy. He is the best known Greek philosopher; the triumph of his work has been so complete and influential in western philosophy, that the famous quote from Alfred North Whitehead, although an exaggeration, is not far from the truth: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."

Plato had many philosophical interests including ethics and politics but he is best known for his metaphysical and epistemological ideas. One of his most influential insights is the Theory of Ideas: to Plato, notions like virtue, justice, beauty, goodness, etc., would not be possible unless we had some direct knowledge of these things in an earlier existence. We are born into this world with an imperfect memory of these Forms. In that ideal world of Ideas, one can experience the real Forms that are perfect and universal. Our world is an imperfect parody of the Platonic flawless and superior world of Ideas. A knowledge of these Forms is possible only through long and arduous study by philosophers but their eventual enlightenment will qualify them, and they alone, to rule society.

Aristotle, a student of Plato for almost 20 years, was the tutor of Alexander the Great. Aristotle's interests covered a wide scope: ethics, metaphysics, physics, biology, mathematics, meteorology, astronomy, psychology, politics and rhetoric, among other topics. Aristotle was the first thinker who systematically developed the study of logic. Some of the components of Aristotelian logic existed long before Aristotle, such as Socrates' ideas on exact definition, argumentative techniques found in Zeno of Elea, Parmenides and Plato, and many other elements traceable to legal reasoning and mathematical proof. Aristotle's logic system consists of five treatises known as the Organon, and although it does not exhaust all logic, it was a pioneering one, revered for centuries and regarded as the ultimate solution to logic and reference for science. Aristotle's contribution in logic and science became an authority and remained unchallenged as late as the modern age: we can recall Galileo who, after careful observation during the Renaissance, came to the conclusion that most of the Aristotelian physics and astronomy was not in line with the empirical evidence and yet, Galileo's ideas were widely rejected by his contemporary Aristotelian scholars. Even during the most obscure times during the Middle Ages, a copy of the Organon, or maybe fragments of it, could be found in all prestigious libraries.

## Hellenistic Philosophy

During the Hellenistic age, four philosophical schools flourished: the Cynics, Sceptics, Epicureans and Stoics. During this time, political power was in the hands of the Macedonians. Therefore, Greek philosophers abandoned their political concerns and focused on problems of the individual. Instead of trying to come up with plans to improve society, their interest was how to be happy or virtuous.

The Cynics rejected all types of conventions: marriage, manners, religion, housing, and even decency. The Sceptic philosophical school systematized old doubts: the senses caused troubles to most philosophers except some rare exceptions like Plato who simply denied the cognitive value of perception in favor of his world of ideas. On top of the skepticism of the senses, the Sceptics added moral and logical skepticism. Epicureanism claimed that life was about pursuing this world's pleasures. They only believed in the material world, a belief that attracted the opposition of the Stoics. Stoics said that everything that happens is due to divine providence, therefore, whatever misfortune occurs, a stoic will accept it without complaint. Stoics rejected Aristotle's views on the relevance of bodily and material goods to human happiness. Achieving happiness, stoics said, is not important; what is actually important is to pursue happiness since the outcome of our attempt is not fully under our own control.

## Legacy

While Rome was expanding, Greece started to decline. The western Mediterranean was left untouched by Alexander the Great. After the first and second Punic Wars (264-241 and 218-201 B.C.), Rome neutralized Carthage and controlled Syracuse (the two leading city-states of the western Mediterranean), and continued its expansion by conquering the Macedonian monarchies during the second century B.C. followed by Spain, France, and Britain. Paradoxically, despite its expansion and military superiority, Rome's influence in the cultural life of Greece was not significant. On the contrary, the influence of Greece on Roman culture was deep and long-lasting. Roman gods were identified with the Olympian deities. Hellenic art, literature, architecture, philosophy and even the language captivated most educated Romans. Rome was superior to Greece in building roads, implementing social cohesion, creating effective systematic legal codes and military tactics. However, Roman science, art, and philosophy were heavily influenced by the Greek tradition.

Given this Roman admiration of all things Greek it is, therefore, no wonder that one of the most important Roman philosophers, Plotinus (204-270 A.D.), is the founder of Neo-Platonism. Plotinus lived during a time of political disaster in Rome. Roman rulers were placed and removed at will by the army in return for favors. German tribes from the north and Persians from the east profited from this scenario; the Roman army was

more concerned with domestic political struggle rather than defending the borders, and their ineptitude in defense was complete. Pestilence reduced the population, unsuccessful military campaigns increased expenditure and taxes while resources diminished, and the entire Roman fiscal system crashed. The world showed few signs of hope during the time of Plotinus, which could explain why the ideal and eternal world of Platonic ideas was an appealing refuge. This shift of attention from the Real World to the Other World was also adopted by pagans and Christians alike, whose philosophies revolved around the idea of an eternal and heavenly afterlife.

Across the millennia, the voices of the Greek philosophers have been shaping our minds, our institutions, our leaders and our civilization as a whole. These Greek thinkers have unquestionably proved that the same problem can be approached in different ways, that common sense is not as common as we like to believe, that considering unfamiliar possibilities can enlarge our thought and that imagination and ideas can be immortal.

## QUESTIONS TO ANSWER FROM THE READING

30PTS

1. How was the use of the scientific method in the Milesian school important to the development of ancient Greek philosophy?
2. According to the text, how did Socrates change the course of philosophy?
3. Choose the philosopher whom you found most interesting. What elements do you agree or disagree with? How does this philosopher still influence our schools of thought today?
4. After reading the text, which elements of modern Western culture or thought do you think have been (directly or indirectly) influenced by ancient Greek philosophy? Are there any still-lingering influences? Do you think it's important that we still teach ancient Greek philosophy? Why or why not?
5. Socrates claimed he knew nothing. Does this attitude contradict the purpose or goals of philosophy? What are the goals of philosophy? What does it mean to be wise? By your definition, was Socrates wise? Why or why not?
6. In the context of this passage, what is the goal of education? What was the goal of the various philosophers and schools of thought in ancient Greece? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.