

The Early Greek Philosophers

Although Babylon and Egypt, as well as China, and other peoples too, developed remarkable skills in astronomy, mathematics, and technology, the Greeks have a unique claim to be at the origin of what we now call Science and Philosophy. Until recently these two activities were not distinguished; the Natural Sciences (Physics, Chemistry, Botany, Biology) were called Natural Philosophy in England until the nineteenth century. If there is a key to why this is so, it may lie in the constant Greek concern to find simple answers to complex questions, and the conviction that such an answer existed.

Already in Hesiod's *Theogony*, we saw a narrative clearly intent on tracing back the multiplicity of cosmic forms and phenomena to a single unified beginning. Hesiod's mythological explanations depended largely on the metaphors of copulation, engendering and birth, seen as a purely mechanical process explained by the latent fertility of the material world, and employed the personified figures of Love and Strife to evoke the mechanisms underlying change, growth and death, union and division. One characteristic feature of Greek thought is its fondness for (or even dependence on) the use of metaphor and personification. Words designating abstract and general properties (Love, Strife, Justice...) very easily take on independent existence, as though such 'realities' subsist in themselves, and not simply in human language.

After Hesiod, the first names that have been transmitted are those of the Milesian school of thinkers (based in the Ionian city of Miletus in what is now Turkey), with their monist concern to identify the one fundamental substance out of which the entire Cosmos is composed. One main characteristic of such men is their curiosity about a wide range of phenomena.

Thales of Miletus (624 - 546) is reported to have predicted an eclipse of the sun in 585, and to have measured the height of the Great Pyramid by comparing the length of its shadow with that of a stick. He taught that all matter was basically water, with the dry ground floating on water. Just as important, he believed that the whole material Cosmos was animated by an inherent moving force, rather like the soul that gives life to the human body. This marks a basic change of question, from "How did the universe arise?" that Hesiod tried to answer in largely mythical ways, to "What is everything made of? What is the essential substance?" One of the main characteristics of these thinkers was the basic conviction that although the universe is full of different kinds of things, everything is essentially made of the same material. The thinkers were always in search of a unified theory that would explain everything. Modern theoretical science continues to pursue that same task.

Until we come to Plato, in what follows we are evoking the names and ideas of men whose works are only known to us through fragments, often single phrases quoted by some later writer. None of their works has survived intact, and some never wrote but only taught; almost every phrase describing their teaching ought to be qualified by "It seems likely that he taught...".

Anaximander (610 - 545) was a disciple of Thales; he too looked for a primal substance, but preferred a negative definition: the Limitless or Boundless, something infinite and undefined, eternal and indestructible, not any single substance known to us. This definition is remarkable for its abstract nature. The Limitless, he thought, is in perpetual motion, always changing, with opposites separating out: hot and cold, moist and dry. He thought of the world as a cylinder floating free in empty space, and was the first to develop a theory to explain the motion of the stars. He had a notion of evolution, thinking that life began in the sea, and that man developed from fish. He wrote of the aggressive nature of natural processes and his book was perhaps the first work of European prose.

Anaximenes (586 - 526) followed Anaximandros, but identified his master's Boundless with air, which has many of the properties of the Boundless and was also believed to be the substance of the life-giving soul. He suggested that everything developed from a

condensation or rarefaction, a warming and cooling, of the original air. He was the first person to state that the moon's light derives from that of the sun, and to propose that eclipses have a purely natural explanation. Until him, eclipses were always seen as supernatural warning signs. Equally important, he explained that the rainbow is the result of sunlight passing through a mist; in Homer and in popular thought, the rainbow was the sign of Iris, one of the messengers of the gods. He begins the 'demythologizing' process that was soon to be developed further by Xenophanes.

These three form the so-called Milesian School that inspired the later Ionian materialists. Each of them is concerned with identifying the one original substance. They do not tackle the question of how the great diversity of the natural world emerged, and the entire problem of the origin of change is left untouched. The Eleatics now turned their attention to problems such as 'the One and the Many,' 'Being and Becoming,' 'Rest and Motion.'

Xenophanes (570 - 475) was born into a poor family in Colophon (now in Turkey). He heard Anaximandros teach, but left his native Ionia when the Persians took power in 546. He went travelling to the West, and in Sicily he may have met Pindar and Aeschylus; he too was a poet. Finally he settled in Elea, in the south of Italy. Perhaps this experience of life in a variety of lands taught him the relative nature of cultural phenomena. He was critical by nature, mocking in satires the luxurious and effeminate lifestyles of the Ionians; more important, he attacked the anthropomorphic gods found in Homer and Hesiod. He was also hostile to the importance people attached to athletics. He was a historian, an ethnologist, and a naturalist, but he always went beyond mere observation to develop a philosophy in each of these areas. He considered them all to be aspects of the one Cosmos, and he looked for an underlying spiritual unity. He examined fossils in Malta and Sicily and explained them in much the same way as we do today, as signs of great evolutions and change in the shape of land and sea. Above all, he is the first Greek to assert that the gods of Homer and Hesiod could not possibly be real. He was repulsed by their viciousness, called the stories about them 'prehistoric fables' and recommended that instead of believing them, people should strive to live in purity, piety, and justice. He affirms a pantheistic vision, declaring that everything forms a single All-One, in which inheres the God without beginning or end, unchanging, who is omnipresent thought. Fossils led him to believe that all things had come into being by a combination of earth and water, by natural processes. Beyond that, he had little to say about the shape or substance of the world. Another immensely important new idea he formulated involves the development of culture and civilization. He is the first thinker to say that humanity has evolved its own culture (including religion) without the help of supernatural beings. As he says, 'in their gods, people depict themselves.' Thus Xenophanes affirms the value and capacity of the Human at the same time as he purifies the concept of the Divine. He rejected popular religion, with its superstitious sacrifices and fortune-telling. Instead, he stresses the importance in human life of moral thought and conduct. God and Nature are for him inseparable, and morality is therefore a matter of living in harmony with nature. Above all, perhaps, he is the first to perceive the distinction between thought and feeling (sense-perception), and to assert that while thought (reason) is reliable, we cannot be sure of knowing things correctly by our senses.

Quotations from Xenophanes

Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all things that are shameful and disgraceful among us, stealing, adultery, deceit of all kinds.

People think that gods are born as they are, have clothes like them, voices and shapes.

If cows, or horses, or lions had hands and could paint and produce works of art as men do, horses would portray their gods as horses, cows as cows, and make their bodies in the image of themselves.

The Ethiopians make their gods black and snub-nosed, the Thracians say theirs have blue eyes and blond hair.

One is god, the greatest among gods and men, like us neither in shape nor in thought... Seeing everywhere, thinking everywhere, hearing everywhere... Effortlessly ruling all things by thought... Remaining ever in the same place, not moving since it is not proper for him to go here and there.

(Translated by Rex Warner)

Pythagoras (581 - 497) is famed as a mathematician, and a mystical theologian, he is said to have originated the word "philosopher" by saying that only God was wise, while he and people like him were seeking union with God who was wisdom in their thought; they were simply "lovers of wisdom" (philo-sophoi). He and his contemporary thinkers, including Plato, were generally termed 'Sophists'. Very little indeed is known about Pythagoras's life, or thought. He left his native Samos and went to live in Italy, where he founded a kind of religious society modelled on the secretive Orphic mystery religions. His teaching was centered on the notion of the transmigration of the soul and his followers seem to have sought liberation from material existence through various magic taboos ('do not poke a fire with iron,' 'do not eat beans'). The Pythagoreans considered the body with its sensual nature to be something evil. The process of pure thought enabled individuals to fulfill their destiny by rising above and mortifying their sensual material nature before death. In addition, since all living creatures, even plants, were inhabited by soul-daemons, the whole living universe was one and equal. Women were admitted to the Pythagorean order as equal with men. The soul returned to new bodies after death, rising progressively higher through the practice of thought, and human life culminated as bard, physician, or prince. Beyond that, the soul was released from the wheel of incarnation and returned to the divine bliss. The dualism of body and soul was reflected in their cosmic dualism of matter and form, unlimited and limit. Numbers, shapes, and what is known as theoretical geometry, were the focus of their scientific studies. It seems likely that the Pythagoreans were the first to state that the earth is a sphere, and that Parmenides (who was the first to write that) learned it from them. Some later Pythagoreans were among the first medical doctors. Pythagoras was fascinated by numbers, and believed that the Cosmos was shaped by numeric proportions. His followers transmitted his ideas, he wrote nothing. It was surely from him that Socrates and Plato learned the soul-body, mind-matter division which echoes the idea found in other Pre-Socratics that the visible universe is essentially unreal (because it moves and changes) while the real is not discernable by the material body's senses.

Meanwhile, living in solitude in the shrine of Artemis in Ephesus, Heraclitus (544 - 484) was also stating the impermanence of material existence, with the famous line "You cannot step twice into the same river" (because the water is always changing). He wrote in an obscure, intuitive style suggested by the way that oracles spoke. Observation of the natural world led him to agree with Xenophanes that all was a unity and that there was a non-material spiritual reality inherent within the material universe. This divine presence, Heraclitus called the Logos (reason). At the same time, he followed the Ionic liking for an original substance. He said that all things developed from fire, and returned to fire, eternally, since the material world had no beginning or end other than fire. Thus his world-view differs by incorporating change and motion as its fundamental law and principal. Everything is involved in a process by which it becomes its opposite, and all things contain their own contraries. "Strife is justice, and war is the father and king of all things." He combines strife and harmony by the rule of universal Reason (Logos). The human soul, according to Heraclitus, is a spark of the universal fire so that the individual is in some sense an image of the cosmos ("I have sought for myself"). When the body dies, the spark returns to the world-fire, there is no individual survival. He sees true happiness as contentment, something which depends on the individual. He stressed that the world of reality is the same for all, not a matter of varying

private responses, while the same reality can be both good and bad, as with the sea which is good for fishes but fatal to humans. He too rejected the anthropomorphic gods of the myths, and taught a single divine spirit who "is day and night, summer and winter, war and peace, fullness and want".

Quotations from Heraclitus

It is wise to listen, not to me but to my Word, and to confess that all things are one.

If you do not hope, you will not find the un hoped-for that is beyond search and reaching.
Nature prefers to hide.

Wisdom is one: to know the thought by which all things are directed through all things.
This world, the same for all, is made by neither gods nor men; it was ever, is now, always will be, an ever-living fire, with measures of it kindling and measures of it expiring.

The transformation of fire is sea, half the sea is land, half is wind.

All things are exchanged for fire, fire for all things, like goods for money and money for goods.

Fire is lack and excess.

Fire lives the death of air, air lives the death of fire; water lives the death of earth, earth the death of water.

Fire will come and judge and overtake all.

You cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh water is ever flowing down.

The way up and the way down is the same.

In the circle, beginning and end are one.

I have sought for myself.

We step, and do not step, into the same river. We are and we are not.

The cosmos is held together in a tension of opposites, as in a lyre or a bow.

The people must fight for its law as for its walls.
(Translated by Rex Warner)

In Heraclitus we find the beginning of the modern doctrine of the 'unity of opposites' (the central category of dialectics), for Hegel said that he got the idea from Heraclitus. Marx learned it from Hegel. The fragments of Heraclitus's writings are poetic, intuitive, deeply suggestive. He is the most widely-studied of the Pre-Socratic philosophers. He was admired in the early Christian church where his vision of an end in fire seemed to echo images found in the Christian Apocalypse. He stands at the point when the curiosity about matter (ontology and Science) and more abstract general questions about knowledge (epistemology and most modern philosophy) were separating.

Xenophanes as an old man taught Parmenides (540 - 470) in Elea; they are the founders of the Eleatic School. Parmenides was a mystic, deeply marked by an experience of the Real, a realization that "It Is". Since this Reality is thought, and omni-present, he came to

the apparently logical conclusion that there can be no real motion; since Being simply is, there can be neither past nor future. Here the question of the validity of sense-perception, the difference between appearances (illusion) and reality becomes acute. Parmenides and Heraclitus agree that the senses are unreliable, but in opposite ways. Where Heraclitus taught that what is apparently the same river is in fact always changing, that beyond apparently unchanging appearances lies changing reality, Parmenides taught (in conscious opposition) that although everything seems to be moving and limited, Real Being cannot move and is limitless. Above all, Parmenides begins to use logical argument to support his views, instead of making bare assertions as his predecessors mostly did. Still, his total idealism, his stubborn insistence on a vision of reality which completely contradicts all perception and experience, could not last. Those who followed, such as Empedocles, agreed that although fundamental substance (whatever it was) could not come into being or cease to exist, there were equally fundamental processes of change and becoming, combination and separation, on an individual level, that could not be denied as unreal. Parmenides also stressed very strongly the separation of sense and reason or thought, in itself untenable but leading to the dualism expressed in Platonism.

Quotations from Parmenides

IT IS: what is is uncreated and indestructible, for it is complete, immovable, and without end. Nor was it ever, nor will it be; for now IT IS, all at once, continuous, one.

It is immovable in the bonds of mighty chains, without beginning and without end; since coming into being and passing away have been driven far away...

The thing that can be thought, and that for which the thought exists, is the same; for to think is the same as to be.

There is not, and never shall be, anything besides what is, since fate has chained it so as to be whole and immovable. Wherefore all these things are only names which mortals have given, believing them to be true: "coming into being," "passing away," "changing place," "changing colour."

Parmenides stressed the need for paradox, since the logical conclusion of his ideas is that nothing of what we can perceive has any essential reality. This love of paradox was developed by his disciple Zenon of Elea, whom Aristotle called "the inventor of dialectic". Zenon was particularly intrigued by the difficulty of describing the motion of objects in space.

Quotations from Zenon

You cannot reach the other side of a racecourse. First you must get halfway across. To do this, you must get halfway to the halfway point... You can never start at all.

Achilles, chasing a tortoise, can never catch up with it. First he must reach the point from which the tortoise started, but by then the tortoise will have covered some distance. By the time this distance has been covered...

An arrow in the air is motionless. At any given moment it must occupy a space equal to itself...

(Therefore Parmenides is right, there is only continuum.)

Empedocles (490 - 430) from Sicily wrote two poems, in one of which he offered a vision of the cosmos in response to that of Parmenides. According to him, four elements, or roots, air, earth, water, fire (or the qualities light, heavy, moist, dry) are brought together and

divided by a conflict between Love and Hate. Generation and decay are the result of this, things change while the essential elements remain unchanged in themselves. The theory that these four elements combining in precise ratios to form complex material substances remained powerful in Europe until the late 17th century, at least. The name 'elements' has continued to be used to refer to the pure atomic substances which took the place of the old four as the building-blocks of the universe. In a sense, he is the founder of all Chemistry. Empedocles explained the process of growth and decay in ways not so far from Hesiod; he taught that Love brought together and Hate divided. Like Pythagoreans, he believed in the existence above the material world of a realm of pure spirits in a state of bliss; if a spirit loses its purity, it is condemned to life in the material world as a punishment. The last stage of a spirit's purification is life as priest, medical doctor, or prince; from there they may return to their immaterial bliss. Here is radical dualism, with the pure realm of spirit contrasting starkly with life in the impure material world. He also had a very exalted notion of a divine All pervading the entire cosmos with its thought.

One of the last and greatest of the Ionian natural philosophers, Anaxagoras was welcomed in Athens and spent thirty years there, supported by Pericles. He considered that a life entirely devoted to deep thought needed no other justification. He too felt that there was no "primal matter" but that "in everything there is a portion of everything". The universe he sees as a chaos of mingled elements out of which worlds arise, with men and animals, thanks to the work of immaterial Mind (nous), infinite and uncombined but immanent in the material cosmos and forming the living thinking soul of each person. However, unlike most dualists, Anaxagoras did not despise the material world; he was a true contemplative and it was said "the visible disclosed to him the view into the invisible".

In 467 a great meteorite fell and Anaxagoras suggested that the sun too was a mass of incandescent stone, not a god as was generally believed; the moon, too, he thought to be a mass of stone similar to the earth. He too explained the moon's light as a reflection of the sun, and taught Pericles about the mechanical nature of eclipses, rejecting the 'superstitious' fear of them that was linked to the belief that the sun was a living being, a god. In old age he had to leave Athens because of his criticism of conventional religion.

Leukippos and his much greater pupil Democritus (460 - 370) together produced the atomic theory in response to the Eleatics (Parmenides etc.) who accepted the paradox that there could be no empty space, and therefore no motion. Only the Real (Parmenides' Being) exists, says Democritus, but it is divided; there are particles of Being, all the same, eternal substance, solid, small, though of varying shape and size, separated by empty space. These atoms are from eternity moving, not static; they combine to form material objects by chance, not design, then separate again. Democritus was a polymath like Aristotle, interested in everything; he explained the development of human civilization as the result of necessity or need. He considered that the human soul was a material substance, similar to fire, and as perishable as the rest. Like most, he had reservations about sense-perception and none about pure thought. Democritus was probably the first to develop a philosophical discussion of ethics, insisting on the need to use one's reason in order to discover what action is good. Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics rejected this modern, entirely materialistic view in favour of a finite, eternal cosmos dominated by an invisible world of mind or soul.

The Sophists

Democracy in Athens meant long debates in the Agora about many subjects; democratic justice too involved a need to establish clearly the facts of the case by debate. Whether the question was about action or about a person's guilt, the most important elements in the discussions had to be arguments that could persuade: 'because' and 'therefore'. Logic thus became a matter of daily importance. The main claim of each speaker was 'the best action is this' or 'this is true' so that it is hardly surprising that Athenian philosophy developed around questions about what is good, true, just, right. Where the older philosophers and rulers had

taught and ruled by simple affirmation, the citizens of the democratic city-state demanded to be convinced of the rightness of what was being said, they wanted reasons and proof. As a result of this popular interest in words, logic, and debate, philosophy was ready to come down into the streets. At the same time, the themes underwent a great change. Thoughtful people began to realize that the discussion about original substances could never find a basis allowing thinkers to reach a conclusion. Meanwhile the stress on pure thought, and the rejection of sense-perception as illusion, led to a fundamental skepticism as to the possibility of ultimate knowledge of the truth about anything.

Sophism arose from a quite different current. In Ionia, especially, and on the edges of the Greek-speaking world, people had begun to do 'research' (in Greek 'history'; the word 'history' originally meant research) and accumulate information on the customs and laws of other peoples and cultures, both the advanced cultures in Egypt and Babylonia, and 'primitive' ones among Scythians, Thracians, or Lybians. Sophism was essentially a philosophy of civilization, of comparative cultural studies, instead of being a philosophy of nature. The differences between societies and cultures made people reflect on such institutions as language, religion, ethics, esthetics. What was considered good in one place might be thought wrong in another. The fundamental question was whether such things were in accordance with Nature, and therefore sacred, or whether they were the result of human conventions (*nomos*), capable of change and improvement.

The philosophers of nature, although often interested in direct observation and deduction about phenomena, were obliged to use speculation in their search to formulate ideas about original substances and the immaterial essence of things. The Sophists began by accumulating detailed knowledge on all sorts of topics, then went on to formulate general theories about origins and development, or draw practical lessons from what they had found. This method is best described as empirico-inductive. Perhaps the greatest difference lay in the final purpose pursued. The old philosophers almost always believed they were purifying themselves from the material world by thinking, and this ultimately self-centered view meant that if they taught, their aim was to encourage the same withdrawal in their disciples. By contrast, the Sophists wanted to teach people how to live more effectively in society, how to gain control of their lives. The Sophists saw their knowledge as a commodity that the demands of complicated public life in a democracy made necessary and therefore valuable. Young men could no longer be content with family traditions, gymnastics and counting for their education. They had to learn to think, speak, control themselves, dominate others and convince an audience, not only by their words but also impress and even dazzle them by their elegant style. The Sophists were perhaps the first educators in the modern sense; they advertised lectures on a variety of topics and received payment for their teaching. In so doing they challenged the old order, by which a young man learned by absorbing unquestioningly the traditions of his family and society. Sophists inevitably made the young question the old ways and want to follow new ones.

Protagoras of Abdera was the first and the greatest Sophist. His most famous saying is "Man is the measure of all things." This is not as 'humanistic' as it sounds. He is saying that there is no absolute truth, no absolute good; what seems to be good to an individual person is good for that person; there are two sides to any question, both may be right. He is completely agnostic about the fundamental questions: "Of the gods, I cannot say either that they exist or that they do not. It is a very difficult subject and life is not long enough." At the same time, he and other Sophists taught the art of public speaking, of rhetoric. This too suggested a relativistic approach, since by mere technique a false statement might sound like a true one and the citizens be misled about morality. Other Sophists were saying that "Nomos is king of all". "Nomos" means law, but also custom, convention. Then there is no clear code of absolute right and wrong; each person, group, or culture may follow different moral codes. What is obvious for one group may be shocking for another. It was into this context of doubt and relativism that Socrates came with his questions.

Socrates

We only know about Socrates (469 - 399) through Plato's writings, since he himself wrote nothing. The words that Plato gives to Socrates in the early Dialogues, and especially in the Defense, may perhaps be a faithful echo of his voice and approach. However, in the later Dialogues it seems clear that Plato is making Socrates say things that Plato himself would wish to say, that Socrates himself would not have said. It is therefore difficult to know just what Socrates himself said and taught. It seems that he was not interested in general systems, and not at all preoccupied with the general question of primal substances. Rather, we find in Plato a Socrates who has been challenged by the scepticism of the Sophists. He sees that much of what has been taught traditionally may not be true, and that further thought is needed. At the same time, he refuses to accept that all values are relative. His greatest contribution lies perhaps in the way he changes the focus of thought to the definition of certain moral values. For Socrates, philosophy ought to be concerned with helping people to live better lives. The Defence shows him enquiring about the exact definition of words such as 'justice,' 'good,' 'truth'. Socrates seems to have thought that virtue was the fruit of knowledge and that when people did wrong, it was because of their ignorance of what was right. His goal in life was to help people think more deeply, so that they could come to a better knowledge of what was good. In that way the city would become a better place.

Socrates' refusal to accept 'ready-made' and badly-thought definitions was to lay the foundation of the discipline of philosophy. His scepticism was systematic, but at the same time he claimed to hear an inner voice (his 'daemon') that told him what was the right thing to do or say. He did not share the fundamental scepticism of the Sophists, who did not recognize any need to look for ultimate answers to ethical questions. Rather he was an idealist not satisfied by anything less than the perfect answers, which he could never find. His fundamental system was to persistently challenge what others said with questions like, "What precisely do you mean by ...?" This method of debate by brief question and answer is known as Socratic elenchus.

Almost certainly, Socrates shared earlier thinkers' negative opinion of the ethical standards shown by the gods of Homer, and may have spoken mockingly of them. The religious question was not his main concern, however. Still, his challenging attitude was popular among the young, but must have been deeply offensive to the older generation. He had many enemies, and Aristophanes may have helped turn opinion against him by mocking him in Clouds. We see in the Defense a man who cannot tolerate unthinking, foolish replies to serious questions, and his tongue must have been biting. In 399, a charge was made "That Socrates does not believe in the gods in whom the city believes but introduces other and new deities; also, that he corrupts the young." The penalty demanded was death. Plato has given us a text of his Defense (Apology) before the citizens' court, and in the Phaidon an account of Socrates' last day. Plato was not there, but his account of how Socrates refused to run away, and nobly drank the hemlock (poison), com-forting his friends to the end, has given to many a deeper understanding of what "humanism" means. We probably cannot find anything as powerful until we come to the Gospel stories of the death of Jesus. Socrates was nearly seventy years old, with him the Golden Age of Athens ended.

From Socrates' Defense (Apology) (by Plato)

"You know Chaerephon, of course. He was a friend of mine from boyhood, and a good democrat who played his part with the rest of you in the recent expulsion and restoration. And you know what he was like; how enthusiastic he was over anything he had once undertaken. Well, one day he actually went to Delphi and asked this question of the god

(as I said before, gentlemen, please do not interrupt) he asked whether there was anyone wiser than myself. The priestess replied that there was no one....

Please consider my object in telling you this. I want to explain to you how the attack upon my reputation first started. When I heard about the oracle's answer, I said to myself 'What does the god mean? Why does he not use plain language? I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small; so what can he mean by asserting that I am the wisest man in the world? He cannot be telling a lie; that would not be right for him.'

After puzzling about this for some time, I set myself at last with considerable reluctance to check the truth of it in the following way. I went to interview a man with a high reputation for wisdom because I felt that here if anywhere I would succeed in disproving the oracle and pointing out to my divine authority 'You said that I was the wisest of men, but here is a man who is wiser than I am.'

Well, I gave a thorough examination to this person (I need not mention his name, but it was one of our politicians that I was studying when I had this experience) and in conversation with him I formed the impression that although in many people's opinion, and especially in his own, he appeared to be wise, in fact he was not. Then when I began to try to show him that he only thought he was wise and was not really so, my efforts were resented both by him and by many of the other people present. However, I reflected as I walked away: 'Well, I am certainly wiser than this man. It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of; but he thinks that he knows some-thing which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate it seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.' (...)

The effect of these investigations of mine, gentlemen, has been to arouse against me a great deal of hostility, and hostility of a particularly bitter and persistent kind, which has resulted in various malicious suggestions, including the description of me as a professor of wisdom. (...) But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this: that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us 'The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless.'

(Translated by Hugh Tredennick)

Despite the eloquence of his defence, Socrates was convicted. He had then to speak again, before the jury decided on the sentence. He refused absolutely to acknowledge that he had done anything wrong, rather blaming the citizens for their persistent blindness and ignorance; as a result, the number of jurors voting for his death was higher than the number that had declared him guilty. He could not be executed at once, since a sacred boat had just left for Delos and there was a tradition that until it returned, in a month's time, no executions could take place.

From Plato's *Phaedo*: The Death of Socrates

(Socrates is talking about what happens to the soul after death) "Those who are judged to have lived a life of surpassing holiness are released and set free from confinement in these regions of the earth, and passing upward to their pure abode, make their dwelling upon the earth's surface. And of these such as have purified themselves sufficiently by philosophy live thereafter altogether without bodies, and reach habitations even more beautiful, which it is not easy to portray (nor is there time to do so now). But the reasons which we have already described provide ground enough for leaving nothing undone to attain during life some measure of goodness and wisdom; for the prize is glorious and the hope great."

With these words he got up and went into another room to bathe; and Crito went after him, but told us to wait. So we waited, discussing and reviewing what had been said, or else

dwelling upon the greatness of the calamity which had befallen us; for we felt just as though we were losing a father and should be orphans for the rest of our lives. Meanwhile, when Socrates had taken his bath, his children were brought to see him; he had two little sons and one big boy; and the women of the household arrived. He talked to them in Crito's presence and gave them directions about carrying out his wishes; then he told the women and children to go away, and came back himself to join us. It was now nearly sunset, because he had spent a long time inside. He came and sat down, fresh from the bath; and he had only been talking for a few minutes when the prison officer came in, and walked up to him. 'Socrates,' he said, 'at any rate I shall not have to find fault with you, as I do with others, for getting angry with me and cursing me when I tell them to drink the poison, carrying out Government orders. I have come to know during this time that you are the noblest and the gentlest and the bravest of all the men that have ever come here, and now especially I am sure that you are not angry with me, but with them; because you know who are responsible. So now, you know what I came to say, goodbye, and try to bear what must be as easily as you can.' As he spoke, he burst into tears, and turning around, went away. (...)

Crito made a sign to his servant, who went out and after spending a considerable time returned with the man who was to administer the poison; he was carrying it ready prepared in a cup. When Socrates saw him he said 'Well, my good fellow, you understand these things; what ought I to do?'

'Just drink it,' he said, 'and then walk about until you feel a weight in your legs, and then lie down. Then it will act of its own accord.'

As he spoke he handed the cup to Socrates, who received it quite cheerfully, without any change of colour or expression, and said, looking up under his brows with his usual steady gaze, (...) 'I suppose I am allowed, or rather bound, to pray the gods that my removal from this world to the other may be prosperous. This is my prayer then; and I hope that it may be granted.' With these words, quite calmly and with no sign of distaste, he drained the cup in one breath. Up till this time most of us had been fairly successful in keeping back our tears; but when we saw that he was drinking, that he had actually drunk it, we could do so no longer; in spite of myself the tears came pouring, out, so that I covered my face and wept broken-heartedly-not for him, but for my own calamity in losing such a friend. Crito had given up even before me, and had gone out when he could not restrain his tears. But Apollodorus, who had never stopped crying even before, now broke out into such a storm of passionate weeping that he made everyone in the room break down, except Socrates himself, who said:

'Really, my friends, what a way to behave! Why, that was my main reason for sending away the women, to prevent this sort of disturbance; because I am told that one should make one's end in a tranquil frame of mind. Calm yourselves and try to be brave.'

This made us feel ashamed, and we controlled our tears. Socrates walked about, and presently, saying that his legs were heavy, lay down on his back-that was what the man recommended. The man kept his hand upon Socrates, and after a little while examined his feet and legs; then pinched his foot hard and asked if he felt it. Socrates said no. Then he did the same to his legs; and moving gradually up-wards in this way let us see that he was getting cold and numb. Presently he felt him again and said that when it reached the heart, Socrates would be gone. The coldness was spreading about as far as his waist when Socrates uncovered his face-for he had covered it up-and said (they were his last words): 'Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don't forget.' 'No, it shall be done,' said Crito. 'Are you sure that there is nothing else?' Socrates made no reply to this question, but after a little while he stirred; and when the man uncovered him, his eyes were fixed. When Crito saw this, he closed the mouth and eyes. Such, Echecrates, was the end of our comrade, who was, we may fairly say, of all those whom we knew in our time, the bravest and also the wisest and most upright man.

(Translated by Hugh Tredennick)

Plato

Plato was born in Athens in 427. His family was aristocratic and he received a fine education in the traditional arts, including poetry and drama. He was already a skilled poet and had composed tragedies which he was intending to submit for the festival competitions when he met Socrates in about 407. He thereupon stopped writing poetry and burned his tragedies, although the radical hostility to the 'imitative' arts he expresses in the Republic may have developed only later. He was ill in 399 and was not present at Socrates' last moments. He seems to have been so upset that he left Athens and went travelling, perhaps to meet the Pythagoreans in Italy. In 389 he visited Syracuse (Sicily) for the first time. There he met the tyrant Dionysios, and his minister Dion. Returning to Athens, Plato bought a small garden outside the walls of Athens, near the shrine of Academos, to be a place where those interested in study and reflection could live a simple life in community, listening to his lectures and discussing together thoughtfully. This marks the beginning of the Academy, the Platonic university which lasted until it was closed by the emperor Justinian in A.D. 529. It taught various doctrines at different periods of its history, dialectical skepticism and Neoplatonic mysticism being the two main ones, but it was always "Plato's Academy." Plato returned to Syracuse later, in the 360s, hoping to educate the son of Dionysius into the perfect philosopher-king, but that was not possible, and he became part of plots that led to the murder of his friend Dion, as well.

Plato's written works have come down to us complete. They are among the masterpieces of Greek prose. Apart from the poems, and the Defense (Apology), they consist of some 25 dialogues, discussions between a number of speakers, usually including Socrates, from which the readers have to go on to think for themselves. Plato did not teach any fixed doctrine, for, he wrote, "Philosophy is not a thing that can be put into words, like other lessons for learning. But from a long communing over the thing itself and from living together, suddenly as though from a flame leaping a gap, a light kindles in the soul; and after that, it finds its own nourishment."

The early Dialogues (Apology, Laches, Charmides, Crito, etc) offer portraits of Socrates with his attractive, dynamic character and his ugly body, conversations that pass from the simple to the essential, in the quest for knowledge and virtue, which is the greatest good. The dialogues raise questions about the essential nature of some vital quality, and end in a failure to find any satisfactory definition.

The great middle period works (Phaedo, Symposium, Republic,) are narratives describing an earlier conversation, with vivid details in the descriptions. They culminate in the Republic, one of the great works of world culture, with its imaginary 'alternative society' that inspired Mores Utopia as well as many other utopian works and satires. The middle period works often discuss the nature of the essential, real and invisible Ideas or Forms (also called "archetypes" or figures), of which the supreme is that of the Good, which is close in some ways to the Christian God.

The later works (Sophist, Statesman, Timaeus, Laws) are more obscure. The Sophist is about metaphysics, the Statesman about government. The Timaeus was the only work of Plato's that was translated into Latin and read in the Middle Ages, it discusses the relationship between the visible world and the invisible, body and soul, what in the West came to be seen as Macrocosm (the world of invisible forms) and Microcosm (the visible world reflecting it). The Laws return to the nature of government.

Plato's Teaching

Because of the variety of opinions expressed in them, Plato's Dialogues do not express a single complete system, yet the entire history of Western thought after him is deeply marked

by what is usually called Platonism. Essentially, Plato was a dualist, who considered the changing, material world to be an impermanent reflection of the eternal, invisible, immaterial 'real' world. The same dualism is found in his view of the human, with the eternal immaterial soul enclosed and imprisoned in the mortal, physical body. Socrates had first shown him that the question of Virtue and the Good depended on knowledge. The Pythagoreans suggested the dualism of mind and matter, with mathematics serving to link the two. The Eleatics, especially Parmenides, taught him that the world perceived by the senses was illusory, but that there was a fixed, unchanging Real Being of pure Mind, and that a major question was the nature of the link between the One and the many. At the same time, Plato felt obliged to oppose Heraclitus's theory of flux, since it meant that there could be no certain knowledge of anything, there being no unchanging object.

One fundamental characteristic of Plato's approach is the way it insists on the need for clear thought (dialectic) while suggesting that knowledge of invisible realities can only come by some kind of inspired intuition. In this way, Plato prepared the way for strict Aristotelian logic, and suggested its ultimate limits at the same time. Out of his fundamental dualism, with its focus on the transcendental soul, he deduces the basis for ethics and politics, aesthetics, and physics. Plato is convinced that when we recognize that something is good and true, this is not a personal opinion or a distinct quality, but a knowledge common to us all, derived from a recollection (anamnesis) of the experience our souls had before birth of the super-celestial world of pure thought (mind) where the original Idea or Form (eidos; archetype) of each particular worldly reality exists in itself. The one Idea or Form gives rise to the many things we see, instructs us in our actions, and enables us to bring order into the multiplicity of phenomena. The highest value is the Good, and in Plato's universe, the Good is identified with the divine, with God. Thus in Plato's thought, human ethics is an imitation of the divine by means of thought and will, which are actions of the soul. Plato's philosophy is mystical, since in striving to know what is good and true, we are rising toward God and that is what gives meaning to life, and brings true happiness.

Texts from Plato

From Book VII of the Republic: The Image of the Cave:

"Imagine mankind as dwelling in an underground cave with a long entrance open to the light across the whole width of the cave; in this they have been from childhood, with necks and legs fettered, so they have to stay where they are. They cannot move their heads round because of the fetters, and they can only look forward, but light comes to them from fire burning behind them higher up at a distance. Between the fire and the prisoners is a road above their level, and along it imagine a low wall has been built... Bearers are carrying along this road all sorts of articles which they hold projecting above the wall, statues of men and other living things, made of stone or wood." (...)

"What a remarkable image," he said, "and what remarkable prisoners! "

"Just like ourselves," I said. "For, first of all, tell me this: What do you think such people would have seen of themselves and each other except their shadows, which the fire cast on the opposite wall of the cave?"

"I don't see how they could see anything else," said he, "if they were compelled to keep their heads unmoving all their lives!"

"Very well, what of the things being carried along? Would not this be the same?"

"Of course it would."

'Suppose the prisoners were able to talk together, don't you think that when they named the shadows which they saw passing they would believe they were naming things?"

"Indeed I do."

"If so," said I, "such persons would certainly believe that there were no realities except those shadows of handmade things."

"So it must be," he said.

"Now consider what their release would be like, and their cure from these fetters and their folly; let us imagine... One might be released, and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn round and to walk and look towards the firelight; all this would hurt him, and he would be too dazzled to see distinctly those things whose shadows he had seen before. What do you think he would say, if someone told him that what he saw before was foolery, but now he saw more rightly, being a bit nearer reality and turned towards what was a little more real? What if he were shown each of the passing things, and compelled by questions to answer what each one was? Don't you think he would be puzzled, and believe what he saw before was more true than what was shown to him now?"

"Far more."

"Then suppose he were compelled to look towards the real light, it would hurt his eyes, and he would escape by turning them away to the things he was able to look at, and these he would believe to be clearer than what was being shown to him."

"Just so."

"Suppose, now, that someone should drag him up the rough ascent, the steep way up, and never stop until he could drag him out into the light of the sun, would he not be distressed and furious at being drag-ged; and when he came into the light, the brilliance would fill his eyes and he would not be able to see even one of the things now called real?"

"That he would not," he said, "all of a sudden."

"He would have to get used to it, surely, I think, if he is to see the things above. First he would most easily look at the shadows, after that the images of mankind and the rest in water, lastly the things them-selves. After this he would find it easier to survey by night the heavens themselves and all that is in them, gazing at the light of the stars and moon, rather than by day the sun and the sun's light... Last of all, I suppose, the sun; he could look on the sun itself by itself in its own place, and see what it was like, not reflections of it in water or as it appears in some alien setting."

"Necessarily."

"And only after this he might reason about it, how this is he who provides seasons and years, and is set over all there is in the visible region, and he is in a manner the cause of all things which they saw."

(Translated by W. H. D. Rouse)

At the same time as Plato was teaching, another school, that of Isokrates (whom Milton called an "old man eloquent"), was teaching rhetoric, a form of diplomacy, and the means of exercising power in practical politics in a society so governed by debates. Throughout his life, Athenian sculptors and artists continued to produce great masterpieces, most of them now lost, but Plato was not sure of the moral value of art, and in his Republic, poetry is given no place. Never a democrat, Plato seems to have become increasingly totalitarian in his social vision, as his experience of human weakness increased. He died at his desk in 347.

Aristotle

Aristotle was born in 384; his father was a medical doctor. Aristotle studied at the Academy until Plato's death in 347 but when he was not chosen to succeed Plato as its head, he left and went travelling. He was called to Macedonia to teach the young Alexander; he stayed there until about 340. Returning to Athens after Alexander became king, Aristotle founded his own school in a park near the temple of Apollo Lykeios, whence its name : the "Lyceum". He liked to teach small groups while walking together under the trees, so they were called Peripatetics (walkers). After Alexander's death Aristotle fled to Chalkis where he died in 322.

Although he absorbed Plato's teaching deeply, and in his early works taught the doctrines of the immaterial world of Ideas and of the immortality of the soul, Aristotle did not have Plato's

love of speculation; rather he was interested in observations of nature. Later he replaced Plato's Ideas (which are deemed to have independent existence) with the non-transcendent notion of 'concept'. His mind was that of a scientist. Aristotle was interested in encyclopedic knowledge about "things", and in systematizing what could be known about the physical world. The library of collected manuscripts in the Lyceum is the model for all later libraries. There may have been a "Natural History Museum" too. The Lyceum was a research community: Aristotle organized the collection of the Constitutions of 158 Greek states, for example, while other scholars did work on botany, music, physics and the history of science, mathematics, astronomy, theology...

Aristotle's written works have all been lost, although they survived into Roman times. What we have are extensive notes of his lectures. Logic, rhetoric, ethics, political science, physics, metaphysics (presuppositions), biology, were among his courses, and among the most famous of his "works" are the Analytics, the Physics, the Metaphysics, the Nicomachean Ethics, the Politics, the Rhetoric, the Poetics. These texts were long hidden after his death, then they were discovered in a cellar in Athens and taken to Rome by Sulla in 84 BC.

Unlike Plato, Aristotle is not interested in the invisible and the speculative. He prefers to list and classify the visible realities, he has a love of categorizing things into neat systems. He invented some of the most important words used in philosophical reflection: "universal and particular", "premise and conclusion", "subject and attribute", "form and matter", "potentiality and actuality". Where Plato's God was the embodiment of a fundamental moral principle, the Good, Aristotle's was an abstract scientific explanation, the First Mover. Aristotle stressed that we can only have certain knowledge of the things we can observe with our senses; he therefore excluded God and the soul from his field of study and seems not to have believed that the human soul had eternal existence.

Aristotle's works were not available in the early Middle Age in Western Europe; they had not been translated into Latin. In the twelfth century, scholars learned Greek from the Arabs of Spain and obtained from them, as well as from the Eastern Mediterranean, the texts of Aristotle's works. The result was a radical transformation in Western thought, as Aristotelianism challenged the Neo-platonism of Augustine and the other Church Fathers. On the basis of Aristotle's methods the new universities of Paris and Oxford developed a logical methodological approach to Philosophy and Theology called Scholasticism and in the 13th century Thomas of Aquinas in his Summa produced a totally new synthesis of the Christian faith while other students began to see a justification of atheism in the same sources.

Aristotle on Tragedy (from the Poetics)

Epic poetry agrees with Tragedy in so far as it is an imitation in verse of characters of a higher type. They differ, in that Epic poetry admits but one kind of metre, and is narrative in form. They differ, again, in their length: for Tragedy endeavours, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit; whereas the Epic action has no limits of time... Tragedy is an imitation (mimesis) of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation (catharsis) of these emotions. By "language embellished," I mean language into which rhythm, "harmony," and song enter. By "the several kinds in separate parts," I mean, that some parts are rendered through the medium of verse alone, others again with the aid of song. Now as tragic imitation implies persons acting, it necessarily follows, in the first place, that Spectacular equipment will be a part of Tragedy. Next, Song and Diction, for these are the medium of imitation. By "Diction" I mean the mere metrical arrangement of the words: as

for "Song," it is a term whose sense every one understands.

Again, Tragedy is the imitation of an action; and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought; for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves, and these-thought and character-are the two natural causes from which actions spring, and on actions again all success or failure depends. Hence the plot is the imitation of the Action, for by Plot I here mean the arrangement of the incidents. By Character I mean that in virtue of which we ascribe certain qualities to the agents... Most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality.

(Translated by S. A. Butcher)

Later Philosophy

Another master living at the time of Aristotle was Diogenes, whose own master had been impressed by the austerity of Socrates' life. Alexander is said to have visited Diogenes in 335 at Corinth, but Diogenes only asked him not to keep the sun from him with his shadow. He lived on the streets or in a storage pot, and this was such a striking contradiction for an age when every-one wanted to be rich and powerful that many idealistic young men followed him. They termed this approach to life Cynic (dog-like), taught by means of "diatribes" and "homilies" (Latin sermo) from the roadside, criticizing the insincerity of the world. Their life of renunciation, their rough clothes and beards, continued to appeal as an 'alternative lifestyle' until Roman times, but had little impact.

A quite different direction was indicated by Epicurus (341 - 270), who taught in Athens from 306. His school was known as the Garden. He taught that pleasure, the perfect harmony of mind and body, was the highest good. Following the materialism of the atomists, he did not believe in an immortal soul. Despite the modern sense of 'Epicurean' he did not praise the pleasures of sensuality, but valued the higher sensibilities, virtue, the simple life, goodness to friends, freedom from worry. The gods, he said, lived in the spaces between the worlds and have no concern with us, so that there is nothing to fear from them: there is no punishment for sin after death, for example, since there is no enduring soul. The Roman poet Horace professed Epicureanism, like many Roman gentry, and it is at the origin of Lucretius's Latin poem *De Rerum Natura* ("On the Nature of the Universe") left unfinished when he died in 55 B.C.

Stoicism

The most influential of all the Athenian schools was that founded by Zenon of Kition (now Larnaka, Cyprus) who came to Athens soon after the death of Alexander. He first followed the Cynics, but found them too eccentric. Having no money, he taught in the public colonnades (stoai, whence Stoic) on the question of how to live well. He was attracted by the philosophy of Heraclitus, with its vision of fire, the spirit of man being also a spark that will, if well kept, return to heaven so that the goal of life is not pleasure but the preservation of being, that which is truly natural. Man's natural function is to do his duty in the places God has put him, even in power, though public life may be hard and painful. The Stoics did not favour retired living, but they did allow suicide when things became impossible. The world was seen as the expression of the divine Reason (logos), so all is fated to happen as it does.

Stoicism taught the ethics of the cosmopolis, the world-city, not just of the Greek city-state, and praised all who favour the good, of whatever culture or class. Out of that evolved the notion of the universal brotherhood of humankind. It had a deep impact on Rome, and from there on Christianity. Some of Zenon's followers came from the city of Tarsus in Asia Minor,

where St Paul was later born. The Romans Seneca and Cicero were deeply influenced by Stoicism and the Meditations of the emperor Marcus Aurelius are among its best-known expressions.

Hellenistic Philosophy

Any history of the Greek influence on Western thought must include mention of Plotinus (A.D. 205-270), Longinus, and Dionysius the Areopagite, all of whom have had an immense influence.

Plotinus, born in Egypt, after studying in Alexandria went to teach in Rome in A.D. 244. He only began to write after he was 50. He was a very "spiritual" man, a mystic, whose writings are philosophical essays grouped into 6 groups of 9 essays (Enneads). Following Plato, he considered the body and the visible world to be prisons that the soul longs to be free of. The universe is seen as a hierarchy rising from matter to soul, soul to reason, reason to God (pure, abstract Being). Reality is the contemplation of the spiritual world by Reason, the physical world has no real existence. He encouraged a discipline of self-purification, the soul rises by love and enthusiasm until it is united with the One in "ecstasy". This Neo-Platonism had a great influence on Christian thinkers, it is contained in Eusebius' *Preparatio Evangelica* and represents one of the great creative syntheses in the history of philosophy. Western Neo-platonism depends very largely on Plotinus.

Longinus is the name given to the author of a work known as "Longinus on the Sublime" written in the first century of our era. This *Peri Hypsous* is one of the great works of literary theory, trying to determine what constitutes "greatness" in literature, its moral function, and its "sublimity". It was translated by Boileau (1674) into French and many times after that into English. It had enormous influence on late 17th and 18th century European literature.

Dionysius the Areopagite is equally a name without substance. The name is given in the Acts of the Apostles to a philosopher (?) converted by Paul. The Christian works ascribed to him are to be dated around 500, and they are fundamental for the history of Neo-Platonism in the Christian West in the Middle Ages. His main works, especially *The Divine Names*, had a great influence on medieval mysticism.