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Greek Philosophy

Ancient Greek philosophy is dominated by three very famous men: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. All three of these lived in Athens for most of their lives, and they knew each other. Socrates came first, and Plato was his student, around 400 BC. Socrates was killed in 399 BC, and Plato began his work by writing down what Socrates had taught, and then continued by writing down his own ideas and opening a school. Aristotle, who was younger, came to study at Plato's school, and ended up starting his own school as well.

In the years after Plato and Aristotle died, in the 200's BC, three famous kinds of philosophy started up in the schools that Plato and Aristotle had started. These are the Stoics, the Sceptics, and the Epicureans. Each of these continued to be important ways of thinking about the world all the way through the Roman Empire, until people converted to Christianity in the 300's AD, and even after that.

[When] **Socrates** was in his forties or so, he began to feel an urge to think about the world around him, and try to answer some difficult questions. He asked, "What is wisdom?" and "What is beauty?" and "What is the right thing to do?" He knew that these questions were hard to answer, and he thought it would be better to have a lot of people discuss the answers together, so that they might come up with more ideas. So he began to go around Athens asking people he met these questions, "What is wisdom?", "What is piety?", and so forth. Sometimes the people just said they were busy, but sometimes they would try to answer him. Then Socrates would try to teach them to think better by asking them more [questions, which] showed them the problems in their logic. Often this made people angry. Sometimes they even tried to beat him up.

When **Plato** was a young man, he went to listen to Socrates, and learned a lot from Socrates about how to think, and what sort of questions to think about. When Socrates was killed in 399 BC, Plato was very upset (He was 30 years old when Socrates died) . Plato began to write down some of the conversations he had heard Socrates have. Practically everything we know about Socrates comes from what Plato wrote down.

After a while, though, Plato began to write down his own ideas about philosophy instead of just writing down Socrates' ideas. One of his earlier works is the Republic, which describes what Plato thought would be a better form of government than the government of Athens. Plato thought that most people were pretty stupid, and so they should not be voting about what to do. Instead, the best people should be chosen to be the Guardians of the rest. (Remember Plato was from a rich aristocratic family so he probably considered himself among the best people!).

Plato also thought a lot about the natural world and how it works. He thought that everything had a sort of ideal form, like the idea of a chair, and then an actual chair was a sort of poor imitation of the ideal chair that exists only in your mind.

When **Aristotle** was a young man, about 350 BC, he went to study at Plato's Academy. Plato was already pretty old then. Aristotle did very well at the Academy. But he never got to be among its leaders, and when Plato died, Aristotle was not chosen to lead the Academy after him. Soon afterwards, Aristotle left Athens and went to Macedon to be the tutor of the young prince Alexander, who grew up to be Alexander the Great. As far as we can tell, Alexander was not at all interested in learning anything from Aristotle, but they did become friends.

When Alexander grew up and became king, Aristotle went back to Athens and opened his own school there, the Lyceum (lie-SAY-um), in competition with Plato's Academy. Both schools were successful for hundreds of years.

Aristotle was more interested in science than Socrates or Plato, maybe because his father was a doctor. He wanted to use Socrates' logical methods to figure out how the real world worked; therefore Aristotle is really the father of today's scientific method. Aristotle was especially interested in biology, in classifying plants and animals in a way that would make sense. This is part of the Greek impulse to make order out of chaos: to take the chaotic natural world and impose a man-made order on it. When Alexander was [traveling] all over Western Asia, he had his messengers bring strange plants back to Aristotle for his studies. Aristotle also made efforts to create order in peoples' governments. He created a classification system of monarchies, oligarchies, tyrannies, democracies and republics which we still use today.

Use your knowledge of these Greek philosophers to answer the following questions in your notes and better understand the purpose of these philosophies. Please answer these questions in full sentences on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What would the impact have been if these philosophers did not establish institutions that taught these philosophies?
2. How else do we use Socrates' form of questioning in today's world?
3. Socrates never wrote down his own philosophies. Since Plato and Aristotle were the writers, could we just eliminate Socrates from the list of great Greek philosophers? Why or why not?
4. What if these philosophers were not asking questions about large, practical concepts in regards to society, politics, and daily life? How might that have changed the Greek empire?

The Socratic Method

In ancient Greece, Socrates wanted to learn about the world he lived in. He asked himself and people in his community about what was going on in society, daily life, politics, etc. He was so intelligent that he realized it would take a great discussion to answer these large questions, such as “what is beauty?” or “what is wisdom?” Socrates became famous for asking a series of questions to help him come to conclusions. He believed that the answers to these questions were available, but it was the responsibility of the people to ask the right questions to get those answers. Asking a series of questions like this became known as the Socratic Method.

For a very simple example, if Socrates lived today in 2014 and wanted to know “why we wear shoes?”, he might ask the following set of questions:

1. What do we use our feet for? (to walk)
2. Where do we walk? (in our homes, outside)
3. Where do we walk outside? (on the grass, on the sidewalk, on the pavement)
4. What happens when you walk outside barefoot? (sometimes, you scratch/cut/scrap/step in something dirty on the bottoms of your feet)
5. How can you stop from scratching your feet when you walk outside? (put something between your feet and the ground for protection)
6. How could you attach that protection to your foot? (straps, ties, etc.)
7. What are shoes? (a covering around your foot)
8. What does that covering do to help your foot? (protects your foot from getting scratched/cut/scraped/or dirty)
9. Therefore, you wear shoes so you can walk outside and have your feet protected? (yes... and the question is answered)

Creative Problem Solving

Directions: Use the six steps for Creative Problem Solving to answer the following questions. On a separate sheet of paper, I want you to write your responses to each of the steps to show me how you came to your conclusion.

How does the Socratic Method help us to understand our world better?

Step 1: Sort through the passage and find the larger problem

Step 2: Gather information about the problem

Step 3: Rewrite your original problem into a broad statement that will be more suitable for finding the big idea

Step 4: Brainstorm possible ways to solve the problem

Step 5: Pick a way from your “brainstorm list” to try to solve the problem

Step 6: Write out a plan of action to solve the problem. What are your outcomes?

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Understanding Plato's Allegory of the Cave

Directions: Read the following summary of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. While reading this passage, consider the following: What is the problem that Plato is describing, and what was he trying to teach the reader with this allegory? After reading the passage, use the provided steps to help you analyze the allegory.

Summary of the Allegory of the Cave

Imagine prisoners who have been chained since childhood deep inside a cave. Not only are their limbs immobilized by the chains; their heads are chained as well so that their gaze is fixed on a wall.

Behind the prisoners is an enormous fire, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised walkway, along which shapes of various animals, plants, and other things are carried. The shapes cast shadows on the wall, which occupy the prisoners' attention. When one of the shape-carriers speaks, an echo against the wall causes the prisoners to believe that the words come from the shadows.

The prisoners engage in what appears to us to be a game - naming the shapes as they come by. This, however, is the only reality that they know, even though they are seeing merely shadows of images. They are thus conditioned to judge the quality of one another by their skill in quickly naming the shapes and dislike those who begin to play poorly.

Suppose a prisoner is released and compelled to stand up and turn around.

His eyes will be blinded by the firelight, and the shapes passing will appear less real than their shadows.

Similarly, if he is dragged up out of the cave into the sunlight, his eyes will be so blinded that he will not be able to see anything.

At first, he will be able to see darker shapes such as shadows and, only later, brighter and brighter objects.

The last object he would be able to see is the sun, which, in time, he would learn to see as that object which provides the seasons and the courses of the year, presides over all things in the visible region, and is in some way the cause of all these things that he has seen.

Once enlightened, so to speak, the freed prisoner would want to return to the cave to free "his fellow bondsmen". Another problem lies in the other prisoners not wanting to be freed: descending back into the cave would require that the freed prisoner's eyes adjust again, and for a time, he would be one of the ones identifying shapes on the wall. His eyes would be swamped by the darkness, and would take time to become acclimatized. Therefore, he would not be able to identify shapes on the wall as well as the other prisoners, making it seem as if him being taken to the surface completely ruined his eyesight. The other prisoners would then not go to the surface, in fear of losing their eyesight. If someone were to try and force a prisoner to come to the surface, the prisoner would become murderous, and kill whoever tried to force him to come to the surface. (*The Republic* bk. VII, 516b-c; trans. Paul Shorey).

Plato is describing what he feels to be a significant philosophical problem in society. You may use the steps listed below to identify and solve that problem. On a separate piece of paper, write a multi-paragraph essay (this also means complete sentences) describing the problem you identified and the conclusion you reached.

Step 1: Sort through the passage and find the larger problem

Step 2: Gather information about the problem

Step 3: Rewrite your original problem into a broad statement that will be more suitable for finding the big idea

Step 4: Brainstorm possible ways to solve the problem

Step 5: Pick a way from your “brainstorm list” to try to solve the problem

Step 6: Write out a plan of action to solve the problem. What are your outcomes?

