

Ancient Greek Philosophers

Philosophers seek to understand individuals in their relationship with God, nature, and other individuals(God, the world and man) and to determine the meaning of such human ideals as truth, beauty and goodness, justice, and success. The outstanding Greek philosophers were:

Three Important Philosophers:

Socrates

- **Socrates** (469-399 B.C.) advocated the maxim “Know Thyself.” He sought truth through persistent questioning-an approach called the Socratic method. Tried and convicted for “corrupting” the minds of youth, Socrates was put to death by poison. Socrates left no written works. His philosophy is contained in the writings of his students, especially Plato.

Three Important Philosophers: Plato

- **Plato** (427-347 B.C.) wrote many fascinating discussions of knowledge, ethics, religion, beauty and logic, called Dialogues. In the dialogue *The Republic*, Plato described his ideal government, not democracy, but aristocracy of intelligence and wisdom trained to rule. His most famous student was Aristotle.

Three Important Philosophers:

Aristotle

- **Aristotle** (384-322 B.C.) wrote extensive learned treatises on philosophy, science, government and literature. His encyclopedic works strongly influenced European thinking for almost 2,000 years. Among his important books were Logic and Politics. Aristotle served as personal tutor to the young Alexander and stimulated the future leader's interest in Greek culture.

Plato's Thought

Knowledge:

Assumes we can have knowledge;

Primarily interested in what is the true object of knowledge.

Refused to believe that truth is relative;

Ethical conduct must be founded on knowledge and knowledge must be founded on eternal values which are not relative and changing and impermanent but the same for all men and all peoples and all ages.

Plato and Knowledge of the Eternal Forms

- Knowledge is always knowledge of something that is.
- True knowledge must be knowledge of the permanent, the unchanging and capable of clear and scientific definition;
- True knowledge is knowledge of the universal; this is the realm of perfect Forms or Ideas
- The Forms such as Absolute Good, Absolute Beauty, Absolute Justice are real, not simply intellectual constructs.

The Forms

- Is there a gulf between true knowledge and the real world?
- Is true knowledge, knowledge of the abstract and unreal?

For Plato, the universal concept is not an abstraction; for each true universal concept, there corresponds an objective reality; that corresponding reality is of **a higher order than sense-perception**; a higher order does not mean a separate place; the Forms are beyond time and space; **they are beyond the material and yet shared in and participated in; they are transcendent and at the same time immanent;**

*A difficulty for Plato is determining the precise relation between the particular and the universal.

Dialectic

- For Plato, there are degrees or levels of knowledge;
- The disciplined mind ascends to first principles; this requires effort and mental discipline;
- This process is dialectic;

Education

- Behold absolute truths and values; education aims to save people from the shadow world of error, falsehood, prejudice and blindness to true values;
- It is not simply academic; it is concerned with the conduct of life, the development of the soul, the good of the State; the good life is not a product of meditation or simply following rules – it is a life **according to reason**;

Plato and the Allegory of the Cave

Plato asks us to imagine an underground cave which has an opening towards the light. In this cave are living human beings, with their legs and necks chained from childhood in such a way that they face the inside wall of the cave and have never seen the light of the sun. Above and behind them, between the prisoners and the mouth of the cave, is a fire and between them and the fire is a raised way and a low wall, like a screen. Along this way there pass men carrying statues and figures of animals and other objects, in such a manner that the objects they carry appear over the top of the low wall or screen. The prisoners facing the inside wall of the cave, cannot see one another nor the objects carried behind them, but they see the shadows of themselves and of these objects thrown on the wall they are facing. They see only shadows.

The Cave

- These prisoners represent the majority of mankind, that multitude of people who remain all their lives in a state beholding only shadows of reality and hearing only echoes of truth. Their view of the world is distorted by their own passions and preferences, and by the passions and prejudices of other people as conveyed to them by language and rhetoric. They cling to their distorted views with tenacity and have no wish to escape from their prison-house. Moreover, if they were suddenly freed and told to look at the realities of which they had formerly seen the shadows, they would be blinded by the glare of the light, and would imagine that the shadows were far more real than the realities.

The Cave

- However, if one of the prisoners who has escaped grows accustomed to the light, he will after a time be able to look at the concrete sensible objects, of which he had formerly seen but the shadows. This man beholds his fellows in the light of the fire(which represents the visible sun) and is in a state of having been converted from the shadow world of images, prejudices and passions and sophistries, to the real world, though he has not yet ascended to the world of intelligible, non-sensible realities. He sees the prisoners for what they are, namely prisoners, prisoners in the bonds of passion and sophistry. Moreover, if he perseveres and comes out of the cave into the sunlight, he will see the world of sun-illuminated and clear objects(intelligible realities), and, lastly, though only by an effort, he will be able to see the sun itself, which represents the Idea(Form) of the Good, the highest Form, “the universal cause of all things right and beautiful – the source of truth and reason.”

The Cave

If someone, after ascending to the sunshine, went back into the cave, he would be unable to see properly because of the darkness, and so would make himself “ridiculous”; while if he tried to free another and lead him up to the light, the prisoners, who love the darkness and consider the shadows to be true reality, would put the offender to death.