

CENTER OF ATTRACTION
Socrates was far from handsome. All the descriptions and images we have of him portray him as snub-nosed and pug-faced. But he possessed great irony and humor. He also had a powerful personal charisma. People who were themselves of the highest ability were attracted to him, and formed a brilliant circle with him at its center.



THE OMPHALOS STONE
Delphi was regarded as the center of the world. The Greeks placed a huge stone there to be, as they put it, the world's navel – and then revered it as a holy object.

SOCRATES

THE MASTERLY INTERROGATOR

Socrates was in effect the founder of moral philosophy. He also established the method of trying to get at truth by persistent questioning.

SOCRATES WAS THE FIRST great Greek philosopher to be Athenian by birth, and he lived in what has been called that city's golden age. He was born around 470 BC and died in 399 BC, leaving behind him a wife and three children. As a young man, he studied the then-fashionable philosophies of what are now called the "pre-Socratic philosophers," which in their different ways were trying to understand the natural world around us. Two things above all impressed him about them, both of which he thought were to their disadvantage.

The first was that they were at odds with one another. They were a welter of conflicting theories. And there seemed to be no satisfactory way of deciding between them. They propounded exciting ideas about the world, but without much apparent regard for critical method; so it was impossible to tell which of them, if any, was true. But his second objection was that it would make little practical



THE TEMPLE AT DELPHI
The oracle at Delphi was generally regarded as the ultimate source of wisdom about the true nature of things.



THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS
This magnificent fresco in the Vatican, painted by Raphael during the years 1508–11, portrays the most famous thinkers of ancient Greece. At the very centre, side by side, stand Plato and Aristotle. Plato on the left, Aristotle on the right. To the left of them Socrates is addressing a group of bystanders.

difference, anyway, even if we could discover which of them were true. What effect did it have on our actual lives to know how far the sun was from the earth, or whether it was the size of the Peloponnese or bigger than the whole world? Our behavior could in no way be affected by such knowledge. What we needed to know was how to conduct our lives and ourselves. For us, the urgent questions were more like: What is good? What is right? What is just? If we knew the answers to those questions it would have a profound effect on the way we lived.

Socrates did not think he knew the answers to these questions. But he saw that no one else knew them either. When the oracle at Delphi declared him to be the wisest of men, he thought this could mean only that he alone knew that he did not know anything. There was no such thing at that time as securely based knowledge of the natural world, and not much knowledge about the world of human affairs either.



So he went around Athens raising the basic questions of morality and politics with anyone who would listen to him. Such was the interest of the discussions he raised - and he was obviously a charismatic personality as well - that people gathered round him wherever he went, especially the eager young. His procedure was always the same. He would take some concept that was fundamental to our lives and ask, "What is friendship?" or "What is courage?" or "What is religious piety?" He would challenge a person who thought he knew the answer, and then subject that answer to examination by asking the person a series of searching questions about it. For instance, if the person claimed that courage was essentially the capacity to endure, Socrates might say, "But what about obstinacy, then? Obstinate people can show extraordinary persistence, and therefore endurance. Is that courage? Is it even admirable?" And so the other person would be driven to retract his answer, or at least qualify it. Under interrogation it always emerged that the original answer was defective. This showed that although that interlocutor - and what is more the bystanders - had thought they knew what, let us say, "courage" was, actually they did not.

This Socratic questioning became famous. And it killed two birds with one stone. It exposed the ignorance of people who thought they knew - but who in fact, as the Delphic oracle had told Socrates, knew no more than he did. And it aroused in the bystanders an interest in a fundamental philosophical question, and got them launched on a discussion of it. Although Socrates seldom came up with any final answers himself (and in any case it would have been part of his method to insist that any such answer should itself be probed and questioned, and therefore could not be relied on to be "final"), he stimulated an excited interest in the problems he raised, and made people appreciate more fully than they had before the difficulties involved in trying to solve them.

WHAT LIES BEHIND THE WORDS?

When Socrates asked a question like "What is justice?" he was not asking for a mere verbal definition. The fact that we apply the word "just" to all sorts of different people, decisions, laws, and sets of arrangements meant, he believed, that there was something common to them, a common property called "justice" which they all shared; and it was the character of this common property that he was trying to uncover. In other words, he believed that something exists called "justice," and that its existence is real, although



ANCIENT AND REVERED

By the time this mural painting of Socrates was made in a Roman villa during the 1st century AD, he had become a cultural hero in intellectual circles of the Roman Empire.



MAN OF THE PEOPLE
New portraits of Socrates continue to be made to this day. This picture of him walking through the streets of Athens dates from 1897.

enough

"If you will take my advice, you will think little of Socrates, and a great deal more of truth"

SOCRATES

CARELESS OF FAME

Socrates took no steps to ensure the survival of his own work or name. Socrates never, so far as we know, wrote anything down. All the knowledge we have of him comes from other people. The chief of these is his pupil Plato, who wrote an immortal series of dialogues with Socrates as the main speaker. In Plato's early dialogues, at least, we get the views of the historical Socrates. Later, Plato begins putting his own views into Socrates' mouth.



SOCRATES INTERROGATED

In a scene from the play *The Clouds* (423 BC) by the comic dramatist Aristophanes (c. 448–380 BC), who satirized issues such as the new learning of Socrates, Socrates is shown suspended in a basket over peoples' heads. He is being questioned by Strepsiades, another character in the play.

not material, perhaps some sort of essence; and that he was trying to discover the nature of this abstract reality. This view of his was to be developed in the work of his disciple Plato into a belief in abstract Ideas as the perfect and permanent forms of all the entities and characteristics to be found in this imperfect and impermanent world of our daily lives.

“WHAT IS JUSTICE?”

SOCRATES

The very nature of what Socrates did made him a disruptive and subversive influence. He was teaching people to question everything, and he was exposing the ignorance of individuals in power and authority. He became a highly controversial figure, much loved but also much hated. At one of the city's public festivals he was caricatured

in the theatre in front of the whole population of Athens by the comic dramatist Aristophanes, in a play called *The Clouds* (423 BC). In the end, the authorities arrested him

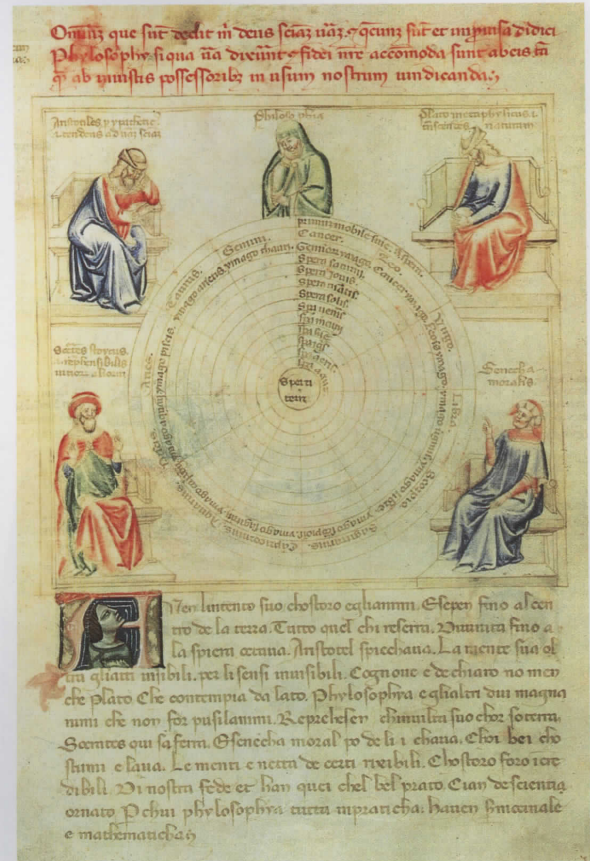
on charges of corrupting the young, and of not believing in the gods of the city. He was tried, and condemned to die by poison. The detailed story of his trial and death is one of the most inspiring tragedies in the history of human thought.

What has made Socrates in some ways the best known of all philosophers is that it was he who began the relentless questioning of our basic concepts that has been characteristic of philosophy ever since. He used to say that he had no positive teachings to offer, only questions to ask. But this was disingenuous.

From certain lines of questioning to

ARISTOPHANES

The immortal comedian Aristophanes was the greatest comic playwright of ancient Greece. In one of his plays he caricatured Socrates on the stage. This indicates how well known to the public Socrates had become.



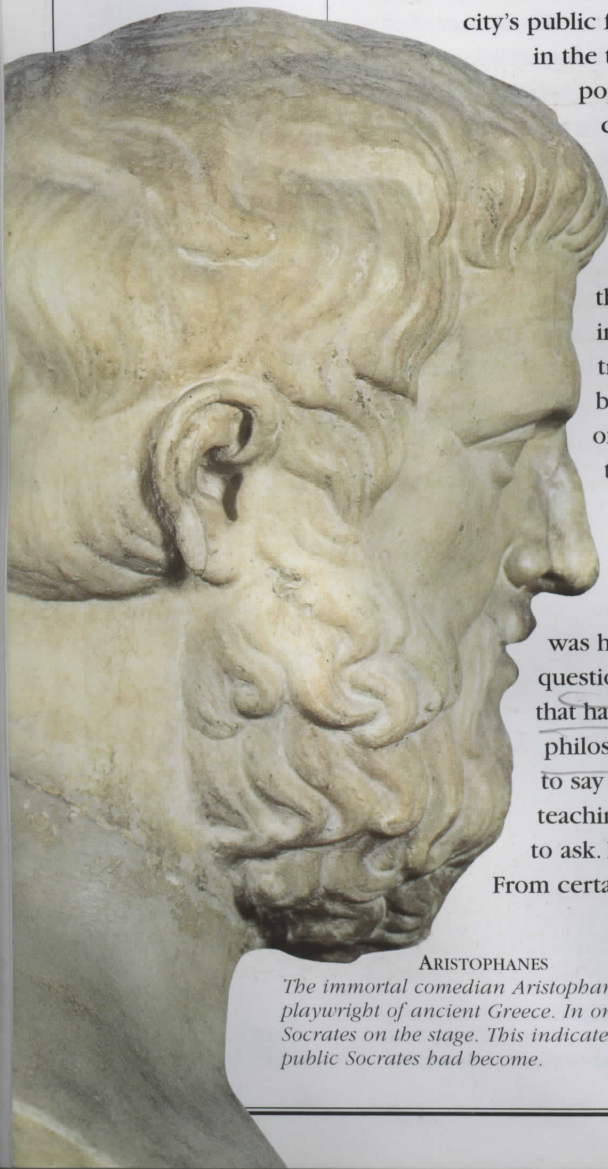
FOUR GREAT PHILOSOPHERS

This medieval Italian manuscript shows the four philosophers most revered by the time of the Renaissance: Aristotle (top left), Plato (top right), Seneca (bottom right), and Socrates (bottom left).

which he continually reverts, it becomes clear that there are certain cherished beliefs that underlie much of what he says.

One is that to a man who preserves his integrity no real, long-term harm can ever come. The uncertainties of this world are such that it can happen to anybody that he is stripped of all his possessions and thrown into prison unjustly, or crippled by accident or disease; but these are chance happenings in a fleeting existence that is going to end soon anyway. Provided your soul remains untouched, your misfortunes will be comparatively trivial. Real personal catastrophe consists in corruption of the soul. That is why it does a person far, far less harm to suffer injustice than to commit it. We should pity the perpetrator of injustice, not the victim of injustice.

This belief of Socrates made him a hero to the Stoics, who hundreds of years later turned him into a sort of secular patron saint. Another basic belief of Socrates was that no one really knowingly does wrong. His point here was that if you really do in the fullest sense understand that it is wrong to do something, then you do not do it. Conversely, if you



do do it, this shows that you have not properly grasped, deep down, that it is wrong. This view has the consequence that virtue becomes a matter of knowledge. This conviction on Socrates' part provided a great deal of the drive behind his tireless pursuit of questions like "What is justice?": he believed that if only we knew the answer to that question we would be bound to behave justly. In such cases, the pursuit of knowledge and an aspiration to virtue are one and the same thing.

BE TRUE TO YOURSELF

It is doubtful whether any philosopher has had more influence than Socrates. He was the first to teach the priority of personal integrity in terms of a person's duty to himself, and not to the gods, or the law, or any other authorities. This has had incalculable influence down the ages. Not only was he willing to die at the hands of the law rather than give up saying what he believed to be right, he actually chose to do so, when he could have escaped had he wished. It is a priority that has been reasserted by some of the greatest minds since - minds not necessarily under his influence. Jesus said: "What

will a man gain by winning the whole world, at the cost of his true self?" And Shakespeare said: "This above all: to thine own self be true."

In addition to this, Socrates did more than any other individual to establish the principle that everything must be open to question - there can be no cut and dried answers, because answers, like everything else, are themselves open to question. Following on from this, he established at the centre of philosophy a method known as dialectic, the method of seeking truth by a process of question and answer. It has remained there ever since, and is used particularly as a teaching method - which is after all what Socrates himself used it for. It is not equally appropriate for all forms of teaching - it is not, for example, a good way of imparting pure information - but as a way of getting people to re-examine what they think they already know, it is incomparable. To be most effective it calls for a sympathetic personal relationship between teacher and pupil, one in which the teacher truly understands the pupil's difficulties and prompts him step by step in the right direction. This is often still called "Socratic method."

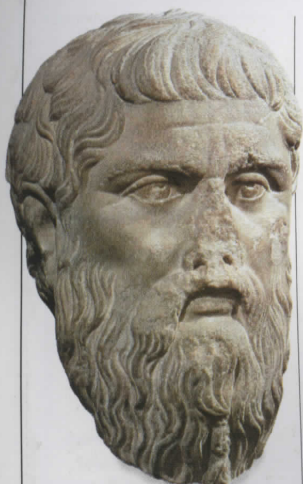
USING THE NAME

Socrates has given his name to the archetypal notion of a wise and dominant figure outside the realm of politics. If we say of a person "He is the Socrates of present-day Paris" everyone knows what we are meaning. We do not use the name of any other philosopher like this.



THE DEATH OF SOCRATES

This famous painting by the French artist David, completed in 1787, shows Socrates about to drink the hemlock that killed him. (In ancient Athens prisoners condemned to death were required to take poison themselves or be killed.) He points to the higher realm which he considers his final destination.



**A WRITER BUT
NOT A RULER**

Plato was a genius in more ways than one. His dialogues, in the finest Greek prose ever written, were works of art as well as works of philosophy. When he tried to influence practical politics, however, he was not successful.

KEY WORKS

The Republic
for an overview
of Plato's whole
philosophy.

The Symposium
for his views
on love.

The Apology,
the Phaedo and
the Crito
for his portrait
of Socrates.

PLATO

BRIDGING THE HUMAN AND ABSTRACT WORLDS

There is a well-known saying that the whole of Western philosophy is footnotes to Plato. This is because his writings have set an agenda which philosophy as a whole – and not only moral philosophy – can be said roughly to have followed ever since.

NONE OF THE PHILOSOPHERS we have considered up to now left written works which have survived. So everything we know about them comes from references and quotations in the writings of other and later thinkers, who knew them or their works, works that have since been lost. Some of the references and quotations are extensive but nevertheless they are incomplete, and second-hand. Socrates wrote nothing at all, and so it is only through the writings of others that we know anything at all about him. Yet we have a vivid sense of his character.

Our chief source here is Plato, who was one of his pupils. Plato was the first Western philosopher who wrote works that survive intact. What is more, we have reason to believe that we possess pretty well his entire output. As with his teacher Socrates, there are many people who regard him as the greatest philosopher of all time.

SOCRATES' PLATO AND PLATO'S SOCRATES

Plato was about 31 when Socrates was executed in 399 BC. He was in the courtroom throughout the trial. That whole sequence of events seems to have come as a traumatic experience to him, for he regarded Socrates as the best and wisest and most just of all human beings. After the death of Socrates, Plato started to circulate a series of philosophical dialogues in which the protagonist is always Socrates, quizzing his interlocutors about the basic concepts of morals and politics, tripping people up with his questions. Plato seems to have had two main motives for doing this. One was defiant, to reassert the teachings of Socrates in spite of their having been officially condemned; the other was to rehabilitate his beloved mentor's reputation, showing him to have been not a corrupter of young men but their most valued teacher.

It is generally agreed among scholars that the chief source of the ideas in Plato's dialogues changed

as the years went by. The early dialogues contain a more or less accurate portrait of the historical Socrates, if we allow for the usual artistic or journalistic licence. The subjects raised were the subjects raised by the real Socrates, and things that Plato had heard him say were put into his mouth. But by the time Plato had come to the end of this material he found he had created an enthusiastic reading public that was eager for more. So, having plenty more to say, he went on writing and publishing dialogues, in what was by now a

“LET NO ONE
ENTER HERE
WHO IS
IGNORANT OF
MATHEMATICS”

PLATO

popular and accepted form that features Socrates as the protagonist; but now he was putting his own ideas into that figure's mouth. Inevitably, this creates a problem for scholars about where the real Socrates ends and Plato begins. Perhaps this can never be satisfactorily solved. But there is little room for doubt that the earlier and later dialogues of Plato present us with the philosophies of two different philosophers, the earlier being Socrates and the later being Plato.

← The earlier is solely concerned with the problems of moral and political philosophy, and is dismissive of philosophical problems about the natural world. One of this earlier philosopher's



THE SCHOOL OF PLATO

Ancient Greece was the first society in which students were taught to think for themselves – to discuss, debate, argue, and criticize – and not just to parrot the views

of their teacher. It led to the most rapid expansion of understanding there had ever been, and to the idea that knowledge can actually grow through criticism.

most committed beliefs is in the identification of virtue with knowledge; and he pursues knowledge entirely through discussion and argument.

None of these things is true of the later philosopher. This one, Plato, is passionately interested in philosophy right across the board, every bit as much applied to the natural world

as to how we should conduct our personal lives. No aspect of reality fails to arouse his interest. Far from being unconcerned with mathematics or physics, he regards these as the keys to understanding the natural world. Over the door of his academy he inscribed the words: "Let no one enter here who is ignorant of mathematics." Many of his most important



THE SIREN VOICE OF ART
 This Roman fresco in a private villa provided people as if the wall did not exist. Plato believed that all art deceived in this way, and was a snare to the soul.

“The wise Plato saith, as ye may read The word must needs accorde with the deed”

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

doctrines are expounded in long explanations that are not discussions or dialogues in any real sense but only in a purely token form, with a cardboard character chiming in every now and again with a “Yes indeed” or “That has to be admitted.” And he rejects the doctrine that virtue is solely a matter of knowing what is right.

Where Plato never parts company with Socrates is in his commitment to the view that the only real harm that can come to a person is harm to the soul, and therefore that it is better to suffer wrong than to commit it; and also in his commitment to thinking for oneself, taking nothing for granted, being ready to question everything and everybody. It was this latter belief that carried him forward over the years from expounding the ideas of Socrates to expounding his own ideas. After all, to think in Socrates’ way, the way Socrates taught other people to think, is to think for oneself



A SCENE FROM THE SYMPOSIUM
 Alcibiades the statesman arrives at the house of Agathon the poet for an evening of conversation that will last for ever.

independently of any authority; so for Plato this meant thinking for himself, independently of Socrates. By departing from Socrates he followed Socrates.

THE FIRST PROFESSOR

Plato lived for half a century after the death of Socrates, dying at the age of 81. During this time he published some two dozen dialogues which vary in length from 20 to 300 pages of modern print. The most famous of all of them are the *Republic*, which is chiefly concerned with the nature of justice, and which attempts, among other things, to set out a blueprint for the ideal state, and the *Symposium*, which is an investigation into the nature of love. Most of the rest are named after whoever appears in them as the chief interlocutor of Socrates. Thus we have the *Phaedo*, the *Laches*, the *Euthyphro*, the *Theaetetus*, the *Parmenides*, the *Timaeus*, and so on.

These dialogues are among the world’s great literature. In addition to containing some of the best philosophy ever produced they are beautifully written – many language scholars think they contain the finest of all Greek prose. Perhaps the most moving of all, and therefore the best to read first, are those most directly to do with the trial and death of Socrates: the *Crito*, the *Apology*, and the *Phaedo*. The *Apology* purports to be the speech made by Socrates in his own defence at his trial, and is his *apologia pro vita sua*, his justification for his life.

CRADLE OF WESTERN CULTURE
 Plato knew Athens in its golden age in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, when this one city was producing not only great philosophy but great physics, mathematics, astronomy, history – and also great sculpture, architecture, and drama. In addition to all this it was the first democracy.

Plato is to be considered as an artist as well as a philosopher. Also, it was he who established the prototype of the college. "Academy" was simply the name of his house, and because he taught grown-up pupils there the word came to be used for any building in which young people of mature years receive a higher education.

IDEAL EXISTENCE

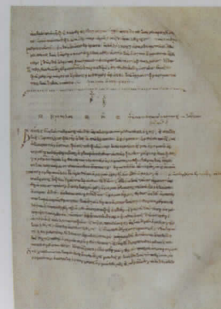
The doctrine for which Plato is best known is his theory of Forms or Ideas, by which for these purposes he meant the same thing. (In this context, the words Form and Idea are usually spelled with a capital letter to make it clear that they are being used in Plato's sense.)

Reference has been made to the fact that when Socrates asked "What is beauty?" or "What is courage?" he regarded himself not as trying to pin down the definition of a word, but as trying to discover the nature of some abstract entity that actually existed. He regarded these entities not as being in some place, or at any particular time, but as having some kind of universal existence that was independent of place and time. The individual

beautiful objects that exist in our everyday world, and the particular courageous actions that individual people perform, are always fleeting, but they partake of the timeless essence of true beauty or true courage; and these are indestructible ideals with an existence of their own.

Plato took up this implied theory about the nature of morals and values and generalized it across the whole of reality. Everything, without exception, in this world of ours he regarded as being an ephemeral, decaying copy of something whose ideal form (hence the terms Ideal and Form) has a permanent and indestructible existence outside space and time.

Plato supported this conclusion with arguments from different sources. For example, it seemed to him that the more we pursue our studies in physics, the clearer it becomes that mathematical relationships are built into everything in the material world. The whole cosmos seems to exemplify order, harmony, proportion - or, as we would now put it, the whole of physics can be expressed in terms of mathematical equations. Plato, following Pythagoras, took this as revealing



THE CLARKE PLATO
Before the invention of printing, the only way writings could be circulated was through being re-copied by hand. Thus a work's being known and studied, perhaps even its very survival, depended on copying, as in the case of the Clarke Plato (895 AD). Throughout the Middle Ages this was one of the chief occupations of scholars and churchmen. So it is through the medieval church that a great deal of pre-Christian culture has been transmitted to the modern world.



RATIONAL ORDER IN ALL, FROM MATHEMATICS TO LAW

Plato continues to crop up in images from his time to our own. This 16th-century fresco in a Romanian monastery

shows him in the company of the mathematician Pythagoras and Solon, the great Athenian reformer and legislator.

AN AUSTERE REGIME
Sparta, the ancient Greek city state that dominated the southern Peloponnese, was flourishing as a rival to Athens when Plato was in the prime of life - but he lived to see its downfall. Its social structure was essentially a military one, and by contrast with cultured, democratic Athens its way of life was disciplined and austere. The word "Spartan" remains in use to this day as a byword for a harsh regime.

if it is not perceptible, how is it accessed?

THE REPUBLIC

Plato's Republic begins as an enquiry into the nature of justice, but broadens out into a consideration of human nature as a whole, including the nature of man's social life, until by the end it has addressed most of the main questions of philosophy. It also contains the first known blueprint for an ideal society. For all these reasons it has now come to be thought of as Plato's masterpiece, the dialogue providing the best overview of his mature philosophy.

that, underlying the messy, not to say chaotic surface of our everyday world, there is an order that has all the ideality and perfection of mathematics. This order is not perceptible to the eye, but it is accessible to the mind, and intelligible to the intellect. Most important of all it is there, it exists, it is what constitutes underlying reality. In pursuit of this particular research program he drew into the Academy some of the leading mathematicians of his day, and under his patronage great strides were made in the development of various aspects of mathematics and what we now think of as the sciences. All were then part of "philosophy."

How?

PLATO AND CHRISTIANITY

This approach, developed by Plato with great richness across a wide area of subject matter, resulted in a view of total reality as being divided into two realms. There is the visible world, the world as it is presented to our senses, our ordinary everyday world, in which nothing lasts and nothing stays the same - as Plato liked to put it, everything in this world is always becoming something else, but nothing ever just permanently is. (This formulation became shortened to "everything is becoming, nothing is.") Everything comes into existence and passes away, everything is imperfect, everything decays. This world in space and time is the only world that our human sensory apparatus can apprehend. But then there is another realm which is not in space or time, and not accessible to our senses, and in which there is permanence and perfect order. This other world is the timeless and unchanging reality of which

"EVERYTHING IS BECOMING, NOTHING IS"

PLATO

our everyday world offers us only brief and unsatisfactory glimpses. But it is what one might call real reality, because it alone is stable, unshakeable - it alone just is, and is not always in the process of sliding into something else.

The implications of the existence of these two realms are the same for us human beings considered as objects as they are for everything else. There is a part of us that can be seen, while underlying

IDEALS THAT LAST
The Venus de Milo (c. 200 BC) is perhaps the most famous statue in the world. It shows the Greek goddess Aphrodite as the ancient Greeks' ideal of feminine beauty.



THE GREEK IDEAL

The Greek genius for combining order with emotion found expression in their way of life, from their politics to their art. Even their vases show an ideal blend of form and feeling. This balance has been regarded as an ideal ever since, and is known as "the Greek ideal," but no subsequent society has succeeded in achieving it.

Souls permanent reality
Body decay, imperfection

Similarities & Hinduism



DANCE BEFORE THE GOD DIONYSOS

The Greek world in which Plato was philosophizing was one in which religious rituals were widespread. For a prominent person to deny the existence of certain pagan gods was for him to put his life in danger. This makes it difficult to be sure to what extent, if at all, Plato really believed in them.

Permanence of soul
Brahma

this is a part that cannot be seen but of which our minds are capable of achieving awareness. The part that can be seen consists of our bodies, material objects that exemplify the laws of physics and inhabit the realm of space and time. These physical bodies of ours come into existence and pass away, are always imperfect, are never the same for two moments together, and are at all times highly perishable. But they are the merest and most fleeting glimpses of something that is also and is non-material, timeless, and indestructible, something that we may refer to as the soul. These souls are our permanent Forms. The order of being that they inhabit is the timeless, spaceless one in which exist all the unchanging Forms that constitute ultimate reality.

Readers who have been brought up in a Christian tradition will at once recognize this view as familiar. That is because the school of philosophy that was dominant in the Hellenistic world in which Christianity came on to the scene and proceeded to develop was the tradition of Platonism. The New Testament was, of course, written in Greek; and many of the deeper thinkers among the early Christians were profoundly concerned to reconcile the revelations of their religion with Plato's main doctrines.

What happened was that the most important of these doctrines became absorbed into orthodox Christian thinking. There was a time when it was quite common for people to refer to Socrates and Plato as "Christians before Christ." Many Christians seriously believed that the historic mission of those Greek thinkers had been to prepare the theoretical foundations for some important aspects of Christianity. The detailed working out of these connections was something that preoccupied many scholars during the Middle Ages.

Plato, to state the obvious, was neither Christian nor Jew, and arrived at his conclusions in complete independence of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In fact, he arrived at them by philosophical argument.

They do not call for any belief in a God, or in religious revelation, and during the period since him they have been accepted in whole or in part by many who were not religious. Plato himself did in fact come to regard the Ideal Forms as divine, because perfect; and he also came to believe, as Pythagoras had done, in reincarnation; but the bulk of his philosophical influence has been on thinkers who declined to go along with him in either of those respects, some completely irreligious.

PLATO'S HOSTILITY TO THE ARTS

Plato believed that for an intelligent person the ultimate aim in life should be to pierce the surface of things and penetrate to the level of underlying reality. This may in turn be understood as a kind of intellectual mysticism, for it means acquiring an intellectual grasp of that world of Ideas in which the soul exists already, and will go on existing for all eternity. In this sense it is rather like rehearsing for being dead - which is exactly what Socrates is quoted in the *Phaedo* as saying the philosopher does.

To achieve this, clearly, the individual needs to see through (in both senses) the decaying ephemera that constitute the world of the senses, to free himself from their attractions and seductions.

It is this requirement that leads Plato to be hostile to the arts. He views the arts as being of their nature representational, and as making a powerful appeal to the senses - and of course the more beautiful the art the more powerful this appeal is bound to be. Works of art are, in his view, doubly deceptive, for they are illusory semblances of things that are illusory semblances. They glamorize the fleeting things of this world, and they enrich our emotional attachment to them, thereby holding us back from our true calling, which is to soar above their level altogether to the timeless and non-sensory reality beyond. So they are a danger to our souls. In an ideal society they would not be allowed. This doctrine of Plato's has since helped to give confidence to people wishing to ban or control the arts.



IMAGINARY LIKENESS

Manuscripts, before the age of printing, were often illuminated with illustrations. These are one of our chief sources of portraits of the philosophers of antiquity, as in the picture of Plato (top left) above. But usually there was nothing on which to base a likeness of the original.

GREEK TRAGEDY
Greek tragedy dealt with some of the deepest of all human concerns, and was therefore of interest to many philosophers. The three outstanding tragedians were Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, all of whom are still performed. One of the perennial themes was the conflict between the individual's private desires or relationships and his duty to society as a whole: an individual who comes into head-on conflict with society almost always ends by being destroyed.

Philosopher king - those who step out of the cave?

STOIC



ST. JOHN

The New Testament apostle St. John the Evangelist (1st century AD), to whom the letters of John are traditionally ascribed, was a Jew steeped in Greek thought. He launched the centuries-long process of accommodating it to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

“If a man seeks from the good life anything beyond itself, it is not the good life that he is seeking”

PLOTINUS

PLATO AND CHRISTIANITY
 Plato had more influence on the development of early Christian thought than any other non-Christian. Greek was still the language of international culture and scholarship in the world into which Jesus was born; and the best-known philosophy in that world was Plato's. The New Testament was written in Greek.

Plato sees the human individual as made up of three conflicting elements: passion, intellect, and will. And he deems it essential for the intellect to be in control, governing passions through the will. From this appraisal of persons, he extrapolates a corresponding view of society as a whole. In his ideal society, an intermediate police class, which he calls the auxiliaries, would keep the masses in order under the direction of a philosophically aware governing class, who would act as the guardians of society as a whole. Put like this, it sounds not unlike a description of the communist societies of the 20th century; and it was indeed to be the case that Plato's political ideas had an immense influence down the centuries, and not least on the utopian totalitarian philosophies of Left and Right that characterized the 20th century.

DISCIPLES OF GENIUS

The writings of Plato, plus those of philosophers who developed under his influence, were to dominate philosophy in Europe for six or seven hundred years - until, that is, the rise of Christian thought to a position of comparable and then greater pre-eminence.

The most gifted of Plato's successors was one of the most immediate, his pupil Aristotle, whose work is of such importance that it will receive extended consideration in its own right. Aristotle founded a tradition in philosophy that was different from Plato's, and often at odds with it - yet, even so, he several times says "we" to describe the disciples of Plato. Apart from Aristotle, the outstanding philosopher to emerge directly

from under the influence of Plato's teaching came hundreds of years later, towards the end of its period of dominance, in the 3rd century AD. He was Plotinus, who was born in 204 AD and died in 269 AD.

Plotinus, though an Egyptian (with a Roman name), wrote in Greek, and can be thought of as the last of the great Greek philosophers, the end of a line of succession that had begun with Thales in the 6th century BC, and indeed the last great philosopher of antiquity altogether. His thought developed the mystical strain in Plato's and came to be known as Neo-Platonism. He was not a Christian and he never mentioned Christianity in his writings, yet his philosophy stands recognizably close to those of the two greatest Christian philosophers of the next thousand years, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. His influence on the development of Christian thought was enormous. The famous 20th-century Christian writer Dean Inge refers to him as "the great thinker who must be, for all time, the classical representative of mystical philosophy. No other mystical thinker even approaches Plotinus in power and insight and profound spiritual penetration."

THE PHILOSOPHER-MYSTIC

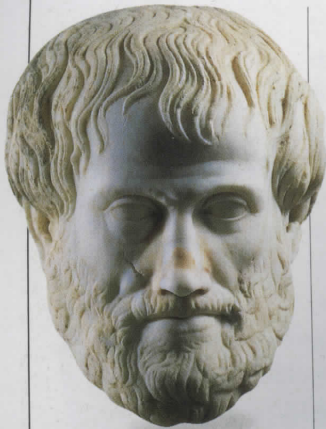
Plotinus' work, more than that of anyone before him except for Plato himself, made Platonic philosophy central to the intellectual development of Christianity. Plotinus taught that since ultimate reality consists of Plato's Ideal Forms, what exists is ultimately mental, and therefore for something to be created is for it to be thought. There are, he believed, three ascending levels of being.

The lowest, on which human beings are, is soul. The next level up, on which the Ideal Forms are apprehended, is intellect. The highest level is the good. Reflective human beings are engaged in an attempted ascent towards one-ness with the good. Christians translated this into their doctrines that the world has been created in the mind of God, and that human beings are aspiring to one-ness with God, who is perfect goodness.



APPROVED PAGAN PHILOSOPHER

Though not a Christian, Plotinus' ideas found sufficient approval for his sarcophagus to be housed in one of the Vatican's museums.



GENIUS UNDIMMED
Aristotle is regarded by virtually all serious students of philosophy as one of the three or four greatest giants of the subject. Today his *Metaphysics* and his *Ethics*, in particular, are studied in universities all over the world.

“Plato is dear to me, but dearer still is truth”

ARISTOTLE



ARISTOTLE AND ALEXANDER

Aristotle the philosopher tutoring his gifted young pupil Alexander the Great, who went on to conquer the whole of the known world.

ARISTOTLE

THE MAN WHO MAPPED OUT SCIENCES AND FORMULATED LOGIC

Aristotle was the founder of an approach to philosophy that starts from observation and experience, prior to abstract thinking.

JUST AS PLATO HAD been a pupil of Socrates, so Aristotle was a pupil of Plato. And Aristotle himself became tutor to Alexander the Great, so there is a direct line of intellectual succession here through four generations of tremendous historical figures.

Aristotle's father was court physician to the king of Macedon, which is how he later came to be tutor to Alexander, son of Philip of Macedon. Aristotle himself was born in the city of Stagira in 384 BC. His father died when he was still a boy, so he was brought up by a guardian, who sent him to Athens when he was about 17 to be educated at Plato's Academy. Aristotle stayed at the Academy for something like 20 years. Later in life, in about 335 BC, he founded a school of his own in Athens called the Lyceum: its archaeological site was recently discovered, to great international excitement, in 1996. He died in the year 322 BC at the age of 62.

PHILOSOPHER OF THIS WORLD

Aristotle fully acknowledged Plato's genius, and his own indebtedness to him, but rejected something fundamental to Plato's philosophy, namely the idea that there are two worlds. As we have seen, Plato taught that there can be no such thing as reliable knowledge of this ever-changing world that is presented to our senses. The objects of true knowledge inhabit, he said, another world, an abstract realm independent of time and space, accessible only to the intellect. As far as Aristotle was concerned, there is only one world that we can do any philosophizing about, and that is this world we live in and experience. To him this is a world of inexhaustible fascination and wonder. Indeed, he believed that it was this

sense of wonder that caused human beings to philosophize in the first place, whether as individuals or as a species; that *this* is the world they want to get to know and understand.

Furthermore, Aristotle did not believe that we could find any firm ground outside this world on which to stand, and from which to pursue

“WHAT IS BEING?”

ARISTOTLE

philosophical enquiries. Whatever is outside all possibility of experience for us can be nothing for us. We have no validatable way of referring to it, or talking about it, and therefore it cannot enter into our discourse in any reliable way: if we stray beyond the ground covered by experience we wander into empty talk. From this standpoint Aristotle was dismissive of Plato's Ideal Forms: he simply did not believe that we have any good reasons to believe that they exist, and what is more he did not believe that they do exist.

Aristotle's desire to know about the world of experience was like an unslakable lust. Throughout his life he poured himself into research with gargantuan passion and energy across an almost incredibly wide range. He mapped out for the first

PLATO AND ARISTOTLE - PHILOSOPHY'S TWO WORLDS
Plato on the left, holds the Timaeus, a work of abstract metaphysics, and points to higher things. Aristotle clutches his Ethics, and says by his gesture that we should keep our feet on the ground. These two opposing tendencies of philosophy have been in conflict throughout its history.



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DANTE, PUPIL OF GENIUS

Dante was the preeminent poet of the late Middle Ages. He regarded Aristotle as the ultimate authority on matters which Christian doctrine did not address.

METAPHYSICS
 The word "metaphysics" comes from the Greek words meaning "after physics," and was simply the name of that book in Aristotle's collected works which came after the book about physics. It denotes the study of the most underlying features of reality - time, space, material substance, and so on.

time many of the basic fields of enquiry, and his own work on them provided the names for them that are used to this day: among these are logic, physics, political science, economics, psychology, metaphysics, meteorology, rhetoric, and ethics. This is an almost unbelievable achievement for one individual. He also invented technical terms in those fields that have been used ever since, the words in other languages being derived either from his Greek terms or from their subsequently Latinized equivalents. Such terms include energy, dynamic, induction, demonstration, substance, attribute, essence, property, accident, category, topic, proposition, and universal. On top of all this he systematized logic, working out which forms of inference were valid and which invalid - in other words, what really does follow from what, and what only appears to but doesn't really; and he gave all

these different forms of inference names. For two thousand years the study of logic was to mean the study of Aristotle's logic.

Before this sort of intellectual accomplishment one can only stand in awe. The human race was not to produce a thinker of Aristotle's calibre for another two thousand years. Indeed, it is doubtful whether any human being has ever known as much as he

“THE TEACHER OF THOSE WHO KNOW”

DANTE ON ARISTOTLE

During the Dark Ages, following the fall of the Roman Empire, knowledge of his work died out in Europe, but was kept alive in the Arab world. From there it made its way back into Europe during the late Middle Ages, and became the biggest single body of scientific, or quasi-scientific, knowledge that Europeans possessed. Inevitably, those parts of it that were to develop as separate sciences eventually outgrew not only Aristotle's own research but also his conceptions and his methods. Nevertheless, in the 14th century we find the Italian poet Dante (1265-1321) referring to Aristotle as "the teacher of those who know". His biology was important until the 19th century, and so was his logic. His general philosophy, including his political and moral theory, and also his aesthetics, remain influential to this day.

THE NATURE OF BEING

The key question from which Aristotle started out was: What *are* the objects in this world? What is it for something to exist? In his own words, "The question that was asked long ago, is asked now, and is always a matter of difficulty [is] What is being?"

His first important conclusion was that things are not just the matter of which they materially consist. He uses the example of a house. If you commissioned a builder to build a house on your

land, and his trucks unloaded on to the site the bricks, the tiles, the wood and so on, and he said to you: "Here you are, here's your house," you would think it must be a joke, and a bad one. There would be all the constituent materials of a house, but it would not be a house at all - just a higgledy-piggledy heap of bricks and so on. To be a house, everything would need to be put together in certain ways, with a very specific and detailed structure, and it would be by virtue of that structure that it was a house. Indeed, the house would not need to be made of those sorts of materials at all, it could be made entirely of other things - concrete, glass, metal, plastics. It does of course (and this retains a certain importance) have to be made of *some* material, but it is not the materials that make it a house, it is the structure and the form. Aristotle's most striking example of this is human beings. Take Socrates, he says. The matter of which his body consists is changing every day, and



ARISTOTLE'S PHYSICS
It is from the title of this work by Aristotle that the subject of physics gets its name.

it changes in its entirety every few years; yet throughout his life he goes on being the same Socrates. Therefore it cannot possibly be contended that Socrates is the matter of which his body consists. Aristotle extends this argument to whole species. We do not call all the different kinds of dogs dogs because they are made of some distinctive material. They are dogs by virtue of a distinctive

organization and structure which they share, and which differentiate them from other animals that are likewise made of flesh, blood, and bone.

These arguments of Aristotle's against the kind of crude materialism which asserts that only matter exists are devastating, and have never been properly answered. Yet from his day to ours there have continued to be some people who are crude materialists. However, until they can answer Aristotle's objections their position would seem to call for little further consideration. Aristotle, then, has established that a thing is whatever it is by virtue of its form. This brings



OUT OF FAVOR
A reaction against Aristotle's world view came eventually in the 16th and 17th centuries. Here, in a book of 1616 about different types of human character, Aristotelian man is compared to an ass.

"Men are good in one way, but bad in many"

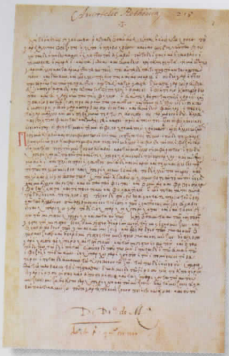
ARISTOTLE



LOOKING CLOSELY AT THE FACTS

Among Aristotle's most valuable contributions were those on careful observation of the facts. This 4th-century fresco is thought to show him leading pupils in an anatomy class. biology and physiology. As always, he tried to base his theories

- KEY WORKS
- Nicomachean Ethics
 - Politics
 - Poetics
 - Rhetoric
 - Posterior Analytics
 - Physics
 - Metaphysics
 - On the Soul



RHETORIC

In this book Aristotle analyses and teaches the art of persuasion – not only how to construct a speech but also how to make a personal impression on the audience, the tricks of the orator's trade.

“The weak are always anxious for justice and equality. The strong pay no heed to either”

ARISTOTLE

WISE WORDS

In 1545 Roger Ascham (1515–68), the English scholar and humanist, made the following observation: “He that will write well in any tongue must follow this counsel of Aristotle, to speak as the common people do, to think as wise men do; and so should every man understand him.”

him straight up against his next problem: What exactly is *form* in this sense? We have established that it is not material, so what is it? Aristotle has already rejected Plato's theory of Forms, so he has ruled out the possibility that form is some sort of other-worldly entity existing outside space and time. To satisfy him it has got to be this-worldly.

THE FOUR BECAUSES

We have seen that, according to Aristotle, form is that which causes something to be the thing it is. This leads him to examine the notion of “cause” in this context; and he ends by breaking the concept of “form” down into four different and



FORM AND INTENTION

In Michelangelo's unfinished sculpture, *The Awakening Slave* (c. 1525–30), a human figure emerges from obscurity. The artist's intention, his concept, and his carving are just as indispensable to the statue as his marble.

complementary kinds of “cause.” Since what he calls “the four causes” constitute the reasons why thing is as it is, it can be helpful to think of them the four “*be-causes*,” in short the four *becauses*. Form is the *explanation* of things.

Let us take his example of a marble statue. For this to be the thing it is there needs first of all to be the marble. This would be called by Aristotle the material cause, the *what-is-it-made-of?* cause. We have already learnt from Aristotle that this is not enough in itself to make the statue, which requires no fewer than three other causes, yet nevertheless the material is necessary, even though not sufficient. For the statue to come into being it needs to have been hewn out of a block of marble by a hammer and chisel: this hewing is what Aristotle calls the efficient cause, the *what-actually-does-or-makes-it?* cause. But again, to be the thing that it is, the statue needs to take the shape that it

“ALL MEN BY NATURE DESIRE TO KNOW”

ARISTOTLE

does, that of a horse or a man or whatsoever – a block of marble hacked at random is not a statue. Aristotle calls this shape the formal cause, the *what-gives-it-the-shape-by-which-it-is-identified?* cause. Then, finally, all of this only happens at all because a sculptor has set out to make a statue in the first place. All three of the other causes have been called into operation in order to realize an intention: the overall reason for the statue's existence is that it is the fulfilment of a sculptor's purposes. Aristotle calls this the final cause, the *ultimate-reason-for-it-all* cause.

Aristotle's four causes, then, are as follows: material cause, efficient cause, formal cause, and final cause. Of the second, third, and fourth of these, any two or more may be the same in an individual case. This is particularly germane in the life sciences: the formal cause of the oak tree that has grown out of the acorn is also its final cause:



THE FATHER OF LOGIC

Aristotle's logic remained at the centre of a Christian higher education throughout the Middle Ages, and well beyond.

This painting of 1502 in the Cathedral of Le Puy, depicts Aristotle's Logic, Cicero's Rhetoric, and Tubal's Music.

the ultimate shape achieved is also the ultimate point of the process. (In this case the material cause would be the wood, bark, and leaves of which the tree consists, and the efficient cause would be the indispensable nourishment of it by earth, water, air, and the light from the sun's fire.)

Through this analysis we begin to understand the nature of Aristotle's conception of form, as against Plato's. According to Aristotle an object's form, though not something material, is inherent in the this-worldly object, and can no more exist separately from it than a man's build can exist separately from his body. Something of utmost significance that this illustrates is that in our understanding of the world we are not compelled to choose between a materialist analysis and an other-worldly analysis: it is possible to develop an understanding of the world that gives full rein to non-materialist considerations while remaining this-worldly. Aristotle always saw the true essence of any object as consisting not in the matter of which it is made but in the function it performs: he once said that if the eye had a soul it would be seeing. He applied this principle also to inanimate objects: he said that if an axe had a soul it would be cutting. The real point of everything, according to him,

is what it *does*, what it is for; and it is through understanding this that we learn to understand things. We also come in this way to an understanding of Aristotle's concepts of soul, form, and final cause.

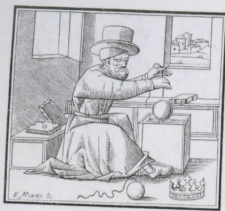
This analysis, in addition to giving Aristotle a solution to the problem of what things are that does away with Plato's Ideal Forms, also provides him with a solution to the problem of change. According to him, change occurs when the ongoing material that is part of something acquires a form that it had not previously possessed.

SAVING THE APPEARANCES

In all attempts to understand the world, says Aristotle, we should never lose sight of the fact that it is *this* world that we are trying to understand. Although we may be in awe of it we should never accept explanations of it that deny the validity of the very experiences we are trying to explain. We should make it a point of method in all our investigations to maintain a firm hold on these experiences, the experiences that actually present themselves to us, and to keep referring back to them at every stage, because it is understanding these that is, so to speak, the final cause of our enquiries. To jettison our hold on them in order

LIFE AT RISK

Like Socrates, Aristotle was indicted for impiety by the Athenians towards the end of his life. In order to prevent them from sinning against philosophy a second time by executing him as they had executed Socrates, he left Athens for Chalcis in 323 BC, and died there the following year, aged 62. Not all subsequent thinkers were so lucky. The most recent philosopher of genius to be tortured to death for his views was Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) in the year 1600.



ARCHIMEDES
The inventor and mathematician Archimedes (287–212 BC) was among Aristotle's most gifted successors in the development of science. He formulated the principle of the lever, and showed that an irregular body's volume could be measured by the amount of water it displaced.

“Poetry is more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history”

ARISTOTLE

to embrace belief in something we do not experience is to throw the baby out with the bath water. He called this principle “saving the appearances.” The phrase is a rather feeble-sounding one, but it is used by philosophers to this day because of the importance of the principle involved.

Plato and Aristotle are the two archetypes of the two main conflicting approaches that have characterized philosophy throughout its history. On the one hand there are philosophers who set only a secondary value on knowledge of the world as it presents itself to our senses, believing that our ultimate concern needs to be with something that lies “behind” or “beyond” (or “hidden below the surface of”) the world. On the other hand there are philosophers who believe that this world is itself the most proper object for our concern and our philosophizing. To take an example much nearer to our own age, the great rationalist philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries believed that the knowledge of the surface of things that our sensory experience seems to give us only too often deceives us; whereas the great empiricist philosophers of the selfsame period believed that reliable information can be based only on direct examination of observable facts. The opposition between the two tendencies is perennial, and comes out in one way or another in age after age, in different guises.

THE GOLDEN MEAN

The respective appeals that the two different approaches possess for individuals may have something to do with personal temperament. People of a religious bent, though by no means only they, are likely to find a more Platonic approach congenial, while more down-to-earth, worldly, commonsensical people are likely to prefer an Aristotelian approach. But the reason why both are perennial is that each emphasizes truths which the

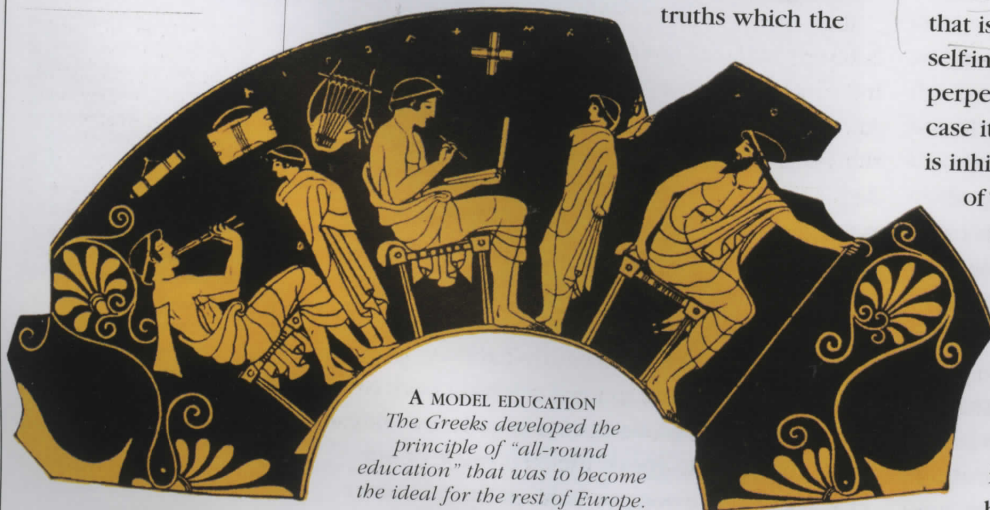
other undervalues. Therefore the important thing is not to be exclusive in our own approach, but to learn from both. The unique genius of the German philosopher Kant, in the late 18th century, is that he brought the two harmoniously together and fused them in a way that is both coherent and plausible.

So far, our discussion of Aristotle has confined itself to his epistemology (theory of knowledge). But something should also be said about other parts of his philosophy. His writings in ethics have been as influential as anyone's, his key book here being the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Whereas for most of the 20th century moral philosophers tended to take a narrow view of the subject, and to devote themselves to the analysis of moral concepts - *What do we mean by good? What do we mean by ought?* - Aristotle's approach was quite different from this, and very much broader.

“MAN IS BY NATURE A POLITICAL ANIMAL”

ARISTOTLE

He starts out from the proposition that what each one of us wants is a happy life in the fullest sense of the phrase. What will give us this, he thinks, is the fullest development and exercise of our capacities that is compatible with living in a society. Unbridled self-indulgence and self-assertion will bring us into perpetual conflict with other people, and in any case it is bad for our character - but then so also is inhibition. So he develops his famous doctrine of “the golden mean,” according to which a virtue is the midway point between two extremes, each of which is a vice. Thus generosity is the mean between profligacy and meanness; courage between foolhardiness and cowardice; self-respect between vanity and self-abasement; modesty between shamelessness and shyness. The aim always is to be a balanced personality. And this, he thinks, is the way to achieve happiness.



A MODEL EDUCATION
The Greeks developed the principle of “all-round education” that was to become the ideal for the rest of Europe.

One striking thing about Aristotle's moral philosophy is how little moralizing there is in it. Its aim is essentially practical. Its doctrine of moderation in all things, and nothing too much, may appeal less to the young and eager than it does to the middle-aged and comfortable; but the young usually come round to thinking more highly of it in the course of time.

THE FULL LIFE

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* leads straight into his *Politics* - in fact the two were intended to be the first and second parts of the same treatise. For according to Aristotle the true purpose of government is to enable its citizens to live the full and happy life discussed in his ethics. And one of his first points is that it is only by being a member of a society that an individual can do this - happiness and self-fulfillment are not to be found in personal isolation. This is the point of his much-quoted phrase "Man is by nature a political animal." There are, he insists, inescapable social and political dimensions to any happy personal life. And one of the most influential aspects of his political philosophy has been his *enabling* view of the State, his idea that the function of the State is to *make possible* the development and happiness of the individual.

PITY AND TERROR

The only other book of Aristotle's that we shall mention is his *Poetics*. This is a discussion of literature and drama. The most important part of it is devoted to poetic tragedy, which Aristotle claims can give us more insight into life than does the study of history. (Most lovers of Shakespeare would agree with that.) The emotional experience we have when we watch a tragedy, Aristotle says, is catharsis, which he defines as purgation, or cleansing, by pity and terror. It was Aristotle who laid it down that a plot should have, in his very own words, "a beginning, a middle, and an end". He also said that the plot of a tragedy "tries as far as is possible to keep within a single revolution of the sun, or only slightly to exceed it". One of his editors



A GREEK THEATER

The Greeks staged their plays in open air theaters such as this one at Taormina, Sicily. The auditorium was fan-shaped and seating levels were not divided.

at the time of the Italian Renaissance, a man called Castelvetro who published an edition of the *Poetics* in 1570, expanded this into the famous doctrine of the three unities of time, place, and action. These have come to be known as "the Aristotelian rules" of the drama, and they have had enormous influence, but they are not strictly speaking Aristotle's idea but rather an extension of one of his ideas.

However, so many of Aristotle's ideas have become part of our culture that it is a tragedy that we do not have in their original form the works that he published. These were famous throughout antiquity for their great beauty of style - the Roman writer and orator Cicero called Aristotle's writing "a river of gold." So widely are they referred to in the writings of others that we know quite a lot about them; but the works themselves have been lost. All that now survive are lecture notes, written up either by Aristotle himself or by his pupils, covering something like a fifth of his total output of ideas. These have nothing like the artistic quality of Plato, in fact they are a bit stodgy to read (as one would expect of lecture notes) so in practice it is only devoted students of philosophy who read them. But of their importance to Western civilization there can be no question.



GREEK DRAMA

The quality of the best Greek drama has never been surpassed. In Athens the plays were attended by most of the male citizen body, and handled what were widely felt to be fundamental issues. Masks were always worn by the actors to represent the characters they were playing - there was no such thing as make-up.