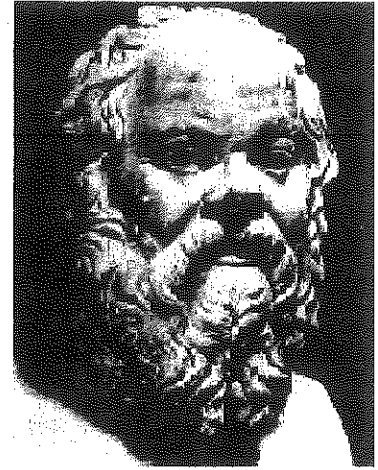


Socrates

From the ranks of the Sophists came Socrates (c.469-399 B.C.), perhaps the most noble and wisest Athenian to have ever lived. He was born sometime in 469, we don't know for sure. What we do know is that his father was Sophroniscus, a stone cutter, and his mother, Phaenarete, was a midwife. Sophroniscus was a close friend of the son of Aristides the Just (c.550-468 B.C.), and the young Socrates was familiar with members of the circle of Pericles. In his youth he fought as a hoplite at Potidaea (432-429), Delium (424) and Amphipolis (422) during the Peloponnesian Wars. To be sure, his later absorption in philosophy made him neglect his private affairs and he eventually fell to a level of comparative poverty. He was perhaps more in love with the study of philosophy than with his



family -- that his wife Xanthippe was shrew is a later tale. In Plato's dialogue, the *Crito*, we meet a Socrates concerned with the future of his three sons. Just the same, his entire life was subordinated to "the supreme art of philosophy." He was a good citizen but held political office only once -- he was elected to the Council of Five Hundred in 406 B.C. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates remarks that:

The true champion of justice, if he intends to survive even for a short time, must necessarily confine himself to private life and leave politics alone.

What we can be sure about Socrates was that he was remarkable for living the life he preached. Taking no fees, Socrates started and dominated an argument wherever the young and intelligent would listen, and people asked his advice on matters of practical conduct and educational problems.

Socrates was not an attractive man -- he was snub-nosed, prematurely bald, and overweight. But, he was strong in body and the intellectual master of every one with whom he came into contact. The Athenian youth flocked to his side as he walked the paths of the *agora*. They clung to his every word and gesture. He was not a Sophist himself, but a philosopher, a lover of wisdom.

In 399 B.C., Socrates was charged with impiety by a jury of five hundred of his fellow citizens. His most famous student, Plato, tells us, that he was charged "as an evil-doer and curious person, searching into things under the earth and above the heavens; and making the worse appear the better cause, and teaching all this to others." He was convicted to death by a margin of six votes. Oddly enough, the jury offered Socrates the chance to pay a small fine for his impiety. He rejected it. He also rejected the pleas of Plato and other students who had a boat waiting for him at Piraeus that would take him to freedom. But Socrates refused to break the law. What kind of citizen would he be if he refused to accept the judgment of the jury? No citizen at all. He spent his last days with his friends before he drank the fatal dose of hemlock.

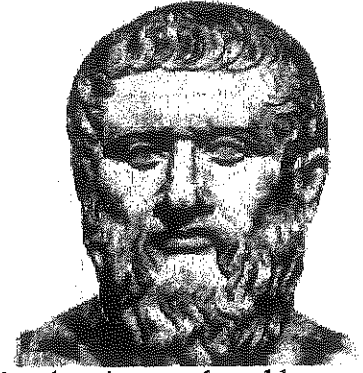
The charge made against Socrates -- disbelief in the state's gods -- implied un-Athenian activities which would corrupt the young and the state if preached publicly. Meletus, the citizen who brought the indictment, sought precedents in the impiety trials of Pericles' friends. Although Socrates was neither a heretic nor an agnostic, there was prejudice against him. He also managed to provoke hostility. For instance, the Delphic oracle is said to have told Chaerephon that no man was wiser than Socrates. During his trial Socrates had the audacity to use this as a justification of his examination of the conduct of all Athenians, claiming that in exposing their falsehoods, he had proved the god right -- he at least knew that he knew nothing. Although this episode smacks of Socrates' well-known irony, he clearly did believe that

his mission was divinely inspired.

Socrates has been described as a gadfly -- a first-class pain. The reason why this charge is somewhat justified is that he challenged his students to think for themselves -- to use their minds to answer questions. He did not reveal answers. He did not reveal truth. Many of his questions were, on the surface, quite simple: what is courage? what is virtue? what is duty? But what Socrates discovered, and what he taught his students to discover, was that most people could not answer these fundamental questions to his satisfaction, yet all of them claimed to be courageous, virtuous and dutiful. So, what Socrates knew, was that he knew nothing, upon this sole fact lay the source of his wisdom. Socrates was not necessarily an intelligent man -- but he was a wise man. And there is a difference between the two.

Plato

Socrates wrote nothing himself. What we know of him comes from the writings of two of his closest friends, Xenophon and Plato. Although Xenophon (c.430-c.354 B.C.) did write four short portraits of Socrates, it is almost to Plato alone that we know anything of Socrates. Plato (c.427-347 B.C.) came from a family of *aristoi*, served in the Peloponnesian War, and was perhaps Socrates' most famous student. He was twenty-eight years old when Socrates was put to death. At the age of forty, Plato established a school at Athens for the education of Athenian youth. The Academy, as it was called, remained in existence from 387 B.C. to A.D. 529, when it was closed by Justinian, the Byzantine emperor.



Our knowledge of Socrates comes to us from numerous dialogues which Plato wrote after 399. In nearly every dialogue – and there are more than thirty that we know about – Socrates is the main speaker. The style of the Plato's dialogue is important – it is the Socratic style that he employs throughout. A Socratic dialogue takes the form of question-answer, question-answer, question-answer. It is a dialectical style as well. Socrates would argue both sides of a question in order to arrive at a conclusion. Then that conclusion is argued against another assumption and so on. Perhaps it is not that difficult to understand why Socrates was considered a gadfly!

There is a reason why Socrates employed this style, as well as why Plato recorded his experience with Socrates in the form of a dialogue. Socrates taught Plato a great many things, but one of the things Plato more or less discovered on his own was that mankind is born with knowledge. That is, knowledge is present in the human mind at birth. It is not so much that we "learn" things in our daily experience, but that we "recollect" them. In other words, this knowledge is already there. This may explain why Socrates did not give his students answers, but only questions. His job was not to teach truth but to show his students how they could "pull" truth out of their own minds (it is for this reason that Socrates often considered himself a midwife in the labor of knowledge). And this is the point of the dialogues. For only in conversation, only in dialogue, can truth and wisdom come to the surface.

Plato's greatest and most enduring work was his lengthy dialogue, *The Republic*. This dialogue has often been regarded as Plato's blueprint for a future society of perfection. I do not accept this opinion. Instead, I would like to suggest that *The Republic* is not a blueprint for a future society, but rather, is a dialogue which discusses the education necessary to produce such a society. It is an education of a strange sort – he called it *paideia*. Nearly impossible to translate into modern idiom, *paideia* refers to the process whereby the physical, mental and spiritual development of the individual is of paramount importance. It is the education of the total individual.

The Republic discusses a number of topics including the nature of justice, statesmanship, ethics and the nature of politics. It is in *The Republic* that Plato suggests that democracy was little more than a "charming form of government." And this he is writing less than one hundred years after the brilliant age of Periclean democracy. So much for democracy. After all, it was Athenian democracy that convicted Socrates. For Plato, the citizens are the least desirable participants in government. Instead, a philosopher-king or guardian should hold the reigns of power. An aristocracy if you will – an aristocracy of the very best – the best of the *aristoi*.

Plato's *Republic* also embodies one of the clearest expressions of his theory of knowledge. In *The*

Republic, Plato asks what is knowledge? what is illusion? what is reality? how do we know? what makes a thing, a thing? what can we know? These are epistemological questions – that is, they are questions about knowledge itself. He distinguishes between the reality presented to us by our senses – sight, touch, taste, sound and smell – and the essence or Form of that reality. In other words, reality is always changing – knowledge of reality is individual, it is particular, it is knowledge only to the individual knower, it is not universal.

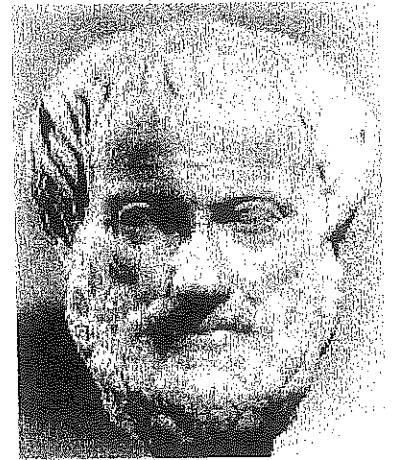
Building upon the wisdom of Socrates and Parmenides, Plato argued that reality is known only through the mind. There is a higher world, independent of the world we may experience through our senses. Because the senses may deceive us, it is necessary that this higher world exist, a world of Ideas or Forms – of what is unchanging, absolute and universal. In other words, although there may be something from the phenomenal world which we consider beautiful or good or just, Plato postulates that there is a higher unchanging reality of the beautiful, goodness or justice. To live in accordance with these universal standards is the good life -- to grasp the Forms is to grasp ultimate truth.

The unphilosophical man – that is, all of us – is at the mercy of sense impressions and unfortunately, our sense impressions oftentimes fail us. Our senses deceive us. But because we trust our senses, we are like prisoners in a cave – we mistake shadows on a wall for reality. This is the central argument of Plato's *ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE* which appears in Book VII of *The Republic*.

Plato realized that the Athenian state, and along with it, Athenian direct democracy, had failed to realize its lofty ideals. Instead, the citizens sent Socrates to his death and direct democracy had failed. The purpose of *The Republic* was something of a warning to all Athenians that without respect for law, leadership and a sound education for the young, their city would continue to decay. Plato wanted to rescue Athens from degeneration by reviving that sense of community that had at one time made the polis great. The only way to do this, Plato argued, was to give control over to the Philosopher-Kings, men who had philosophical knowledge, and to give little more than "noble lies" to everyone else. The problem as Plato saw it was that power and wisdom had traveled divergent paths -- his solution was to unite them in the guise of the Philosopher-King.

Aristotle

Plato's most famous student was Aristotle (384-322 B.C.). His father was the personal physician to Philip of Macedon and Aristotle was, for a time at least, the personal tutor of Alexander the Great. Aristotle styled himself a biologist – he is said to have spent his honeymoon collecting specimens at the seashore. He too was charged with impiety, but fled rather than face the charges – I suppose that tells you something about Aristotle.



At the age of eighteen, Aristotle became the student at the Academy of Plato (who was then sixty years of age). Aristotle also started his own school, the Lyceum in 335 B.C. It too was closed by Justinian in A.D. 529.

Aristotle was a "polymath" – he knew a great deal about nearly everything. Very little of Aristotle's writings remain extant. But his students recorded nearly everything he discussed at the Lyceum. In fact, the books to which Aristotle's name is attributed are really little more than student notebooks. This may account for the fact that Aristotle's philosophy is one of the more difficult to digest. Regardless, Aristotle lectured on astronomy, physics, logic, aesthetics, music, drama, tragedy, poetry, zoology, ethics and politics. The one field in which he did not excel was mathematics. Plato, on the other hand, was a master of geometry.

As a scientist, Aristotle's epistemology is perhaps closer to our own. For Aristotle did not agree with Plato that there is an essence or Form or Absolute behind every object in the phenomenal world. I suppose you could argue that Aristotle came from the Jack Webb school of epistemology – "nothing but the facts, Mam." Or, as one historian has put it: "The point is, that an elephant, when present, is noticed." In other words, whereas Plato suggested that man was born with knowledge, Aristotle argued that knowledge comes from experience. And there, in the space of just a few decades, we have the essence of those two philosophical traditions which have occupied the western intellectual tradition for the past 2500 years. Rationalism – knowledge is *a priori* (comes before experience) and Empiricism – knowledge is *a posteriori* (comes after experience).

It is almost fitting that one of Plato's greatest students ought to have also been his greatest critics. Like Democritus, Aristotle had confidence in sense perception. As a result, he had little patience with Plato's higher world of the Forms. However, Aristotle argued that there were universal principles but that they are derived from experience. He could not accept, as had Plato, that there was a world of Forms beyond space and time. Aristotle argued that that there were Forms and Absolutes, but that they resided in the thing itself. From our experience with horses, for instance, we can deduce the essence of "horseness." This universal, as it had been for Plato, was the true object of human knowledge.

It perhaps goes without saying that the western intellectual tradition, as well as the history of western philosophy, must begin with an investigation of ancient Greek thought. From Thales and the matter philosophers to the empiricism of Aristotle, the Greeks passed on to the west a spirit of rational inquiry that is very much our own intellectual property. And while we may never think of Plato or Aristotle as we carry on in our daily lives, it was their inquiry into knowledge that has served as the foundation for all subsequent inquiries. Indeed, many have argued with W. H. Auden that "had Greek civilization never existed we would never have become fully conscious, which is to say that we would never have become, for better or worse, fully human."

