

Greek Philosophers

A BRIEF OVERVIEW.

SOCRATES:

POINT 1- Socrates aimed to expose errors or inconsistencies in his interlocutors' positions. He did so by asking them QUESTIONS(!!!!), often demanding yes-or-no answers, and then reduced their positions to absurdity. He was, in short, aiming for his interlocutor to admit his own ignorance, especially where the interlocutor thought that he knew what he did not in fact know.

POINT 2- From this point is presumably the place from which a thoughtful person can then make a fresh start on the way to seeking truth.

POINT 3- Socrates practiced philosophy openly, did not charge fees for doing so and allowed anyone who wanted to engage with him to do so. Xenophon says:

"Socrates lived ever in the open; for early in the morning he went to the public promenades and training-grounds; in the forenoon he was seen in the market; and the rest of the day he passed just where most people were to be met: he was generally talking, and anyone might listen."

Often his discussions had to do with topics of virtue—justice, courage, temperance (moderation or restraint) and wisdom (*Memorabilia*, Book I, i.16). This sort of open practice made Socrates well known but also unpopular, which eventually led to his execution.

POINT 4- Socrates practiced philosophy, in an effort to know himself, daily and even in the face of his own death. In Plato's *Crito*, in which Crito comes to Socrates' prison cell to persuade Socrates to escape, Socrates wants to know whether escaping would be just, and imminent death does not deter him from seeking an answer to that question.

PLATO:

POINT 1- We cannot be sure when he met Socrates. Although ancient sources report that he became Socrates' follower at age 18, he might have met Socrates much earlier.

POINT 2- Plato felt if anything can be known, it is the forms. Since things in the world are changing and temporal, we cannot know them; therefore, forms are unchanging and eternal beings that give being to all changing and temporal beings in the world, if knowledge is to be certain and clear. In other words, we cannot know something that is different from one moment to the next. The forms are therefore pure ideas that unify and stabilize the multiplicity of changing beings in the material world.

POINT 3- Plato is famous for his theory of the tripartite soul (psyche), the most thorough formulation of which is in the Republic. The soul is at least logically, if not also ontologically (the nature of being) divided into three parts: reason (logos), spirit (thumos), and appetite or desire (epithumia). Reason is responsible for rational thought and will be in control of the most ordered soul. Spirit is responsible for spirited emotions, like anger. Appetites are responsible not only for natural appetites such as hunger, thirst, and sex, but also for the desire of excess in each of these and other appetites. Why are the three separate, according to Plato? The argument for the distinction between three parts of the soul rests upon the Principle of Contradiction.

ARISTOTLE:

POINT 1- When he was 17, Aristotle was sent to Athens to study at Plato's Academy, which he did for 20 years. After serving as tutor for the young Alexander (later Alexander the Great), Aristotle returned to Athens and started his own school, the Lyceum.

POINT 2- For Aristotle, forms without matter do not exist. I can contemplate the form of human being (that is, what it means to be human), but this would be impossible if actual (embodied) human beings were non-existent. Matter is the potential to take shape through form. Thus, Aristotle is often characterized as the philosopher of earth, while Plato's gaze is towards the heavens, as it appears in Raphael's famous School of Athens painting.

POINT 3- Potential to Actuality- A thing is in potentiality when it is not yet what it can inherently or naturally become. An acorn is potentially an oak tree, but insofar as it is an acorn, it is not yet actually an oak tree. When it is an oak tree, it will have reached its actuality.

therefore

When a being is in actuality, it has fulfilled its end, its telos. All beings by nature are telic (directing, moving toward an end) beings. The end or telos of an acorn is to become an oak tree. The acorn's potentiality is an inner striving towards its fulfillment as an oak tree. If it reaches this fulfillment it is in actuality.

POINT 4- One more important set of technical terms is Aristotle's four causes: material, formal, efficient (moving), and final cause. To know a thing thoroughly is to know its cause (aitia), or what is responsible for making a being who or what it is. For instance, we might think of the causes of a house. The material cause is the bricks, mortar, wood, and any other material that goes to make up the house. Yet, these materials could not come together as a house without the formal cause that gives shape to it. The formal cause is the idea of the house in the architect's soul. The efficient cause would be the builders of the house. The final cause that for which the house exists in the first place, namely shelter, comfort, warmth, and so forth.

THESE ARE ONLY 3 OF THE MOST FAMOUS GREEK PHILOSOPHERS AND SOME OF THEIR IDEAS.