# Greek Philosophy

***Philosophy—study devoted to the examining basic concepts such as truth, existence, reality, and freedom.***

Despite wars and political turmoil, the Greeks had confidence in the power of the mind. Pericles said, “We cultivate the mind. We are lovers of the beautiful, yet simple in our tastes.” Driven by curiosity and a belief in reason, Greek thinkers, artists and writers explored the nature of the universe and the place of people in it.

Some Greek thinkers denied that events were caused by the whims of the gods. Instead, they used observation and reason to find caused for what happened. The Greeks called these thinkers philosophers, meaning “lovers of wisdom.” Greek philosophers explored many subjects, from mathematics and music to logic, or rational thinking. Through reason and observation, they believed they could discover laws that governed the universe.

**🡪In your own words, what is philosophy? Why is philosophy important?**

# Socrates  469-399 B.C.

*“The only thing I know is that I know nothing.”*

A central figure in Athenian city life, Socrates was one of the foremost thinkers of his time and made a profound impact on ancient Western philosophy.  Socrates enjoyed spending his days in Athenian marketplaces discussing any topic imaginable with anyone who cared to join him.  Always barefoot, poorly dressed and of simple means, Socrates refused to receive money for teaching.  Instead, he saw himself as a “horsefly” responsible for stinging life into Athens.

Socrates wrote nothing.  What we do know about him comes from the writings of his students, Plato and Xenophon.  Socrates was born in 469 B.C., the son of Sophroniscus, a stone mason and sculptor.  He had an ordinary Greek education, learned his father’s trade, and practiced it for years before turning to the philosopher’s life.  As a young man, Socrates fought valiantly for Athens in the wars against Sparta. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades’ describes Socrates as short, stout and unattractive in Athenian terms.  He did possess a magnetic personality, however, and drew a large following of young men to his circle.  They especially enjoyed watching Socrates challenge their Greek elders in the intellectual sparring matches that earned him many powerful enemies.

Socrates argued with people.  He took apart what they thought they knew and revealed their ignorance.  Known today as the Socratic Method, this approach to argumentation starts with simple questions that lead the opponent to think he is wiser than the questioner.  In the end, these simple questions become more and more challenging and the opponent’s answers are used to prove he is wrong. Socrates simply asked questions to come to great revelations through his opponent’s answers.  Socrates was committed to uncovering people’s misunderstandings because in his words, “Ignorance is the only evil.”

Socrates possessed a strong spiritual sense and believed his wise thought was the voice of a higher power.  When he was deep in thought, he often fell into a trance that could last for a whole day.  He was passionately committed to leading a good life and believed happiness emerged from it.  Knowing the difference between what is good and what is bad was the central question. Socrates talked to countless people in his pursuit of knowing truth and the good.

In 399 B.C. Socrates was arrested and charged with worshiping false gods and corrupting young minds.  He was found guilty and sentenced to death.  Instead of pleading for his life, as his accusers had hoped for, Socrates suggested that the city of Athens should offer him one meal a day and a statue of him in the marketplace.  The court ruled against his proud statement and ordered the death sentence be carried out.  His friends pleaded with Socrates to flee, but he remained devoted to Athens and its orders, even if they resulted in his death.  As his friends watched, Socrates drank the poisonous Hemlock that brought his death.

Socrates developed no school of thought, no philosophy, and even when he was named the wisest man in Athens, he proclaimed that “the only thing I know is that I know nothing.”  This poor and honest wise man’s way of life and thinking influenced the later works of Plato, the Cynics, Aristotle and Western philosophy in immeasurable ways.

**🡪Socrates was a very wise and proud man. Do you agree with his final decision? Why or why not? What would you have done?**

**Plato** **428-354 BC**

“Is there a perfect world?”

Plato was born into a very wealthy and powerful family and could have easily lived a life of politics because of this.  After seeing his teacher Socrates’ execution at the hands of the Athenian government, Plato decided against a political career.  Believing that great leaders are not born, but educated, Plato focused his energy on study and the establishment of The Academy.  The Academy was a school outside Athens, now considered the first university in the Western world.  One important pupil emerged from The Academy by the name of Aristotle.  He was the third in a direct line of thinkers beginning with Socrates who made the most important philosophical contributions of Ancient Greece.

Plato was most influenced by his eight years of study under Socrates.  Since Socrates never wrote down anything, especially his teachings and thoughts, Plato decided to do it for him.  Plato did not want Socrates to be forgotten and he also wanted his writings to be as true to life as possible.  He usually wrote discussions between Socrates and some other person, with Socrates speaking in the present tense.  As a result of Plato'’ great effort, we now know today what a conversation with Socrates might have sounded like in the Athenian marketplace.

As Plato wrote the conversations of Socrates, his own thoughts began to develop in the process.  In essence, Plato’s thought was blended in with that of Socrates and it is sometimes difficult to separate Plato’s thought from that of Socrates.

In his own right, Plato pushed Socrates’ desire to find certain truths that would not change in relation to justice and the good.  Plato argued that unchanging truths did not only exist for abstract ideas, but that they supported all things.  In Plato’s mind, there was a perfect world, where there existed an ideal model for all things:  plants, courage, animals, mountains – everything.  In The Allegory of the Cave, he highlighted his belief that the world was really a place of untouchable shadows, and that there was a “higher place” of knowledge, truth and perfection.  The role of the philosopher in the Platonic sense was to awaken people to see truth and work tirelessly for perfection.

**🡪What shaped Plato’s thinking about philosophy? What are his most important teachings? Do you agree with these?**