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The Ancient Greeks, Part Two: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle Dr. C. George Boeree "The unexamined life is not worth living." -- Socrates In Ukrainian: Сократ, Платон і Аристотель (translated by Olena Chervona) In Russian: Сократ, Платон и Аристотель (translated by Olga Fiodorova) In Macedonian: Сократ, Платон и Аристотелъ (translated by Katerina Nestiv) In Chinese: 前蘇格拉底時代 (translated by Liu Tu) In Spanish: Sócrates, Platón y Aristóteles (translated by Laura Mancini) In Polish: Sokrates, Platon i Arystoteles (translated by Marek Murawski) In French: Socrate, Platon et Aristote (translated by Mathilde Guibert) In Filipino: Socrates, Plato, at Aristotle (translated by Jessica Higgins) In Serbian: Сократ, Платон и Аристотел (translated by Branca Fiacic) In Mongolian: Сократ, Платон, Аристотель (translated by Batar Ulanov) The Athenians When we think of ancient Greece, we think right away of Athens. Several of the philosophers we have already discussed considered it the pinnacle of their careers to come and teach in this great city. But Athens wasn't always great. It began as a collection of villages in some of the poorest agricultural land in Greece. Only carefully tended grapes and olives provided early Athens with a livelihood, that and trade. The distance between the haves -- the ruling aristocratic trading families -- and the have nots -- peasants working the land -- and the accompanying feudal oppression, grew so great that it looked like the city and its surrounding area would collapse under the weight. In 594 bc, the leaders of the middle class recruited a merchant named Solon to accept leadership of the city and restore some peace and prosperity. He began by canceling all debts and freeing all who had been enslaved on account of debt. Then he proceeded to draft a constitution in which the population was divided into four classes based entirely on economic worth, with the highest retaining the greatest power, but the lowest being exempt from taxes. After a difficult transition, the world's first democracy was established under the leadership of Cleisthenes in 507 bc, when he decreed that all free men would be permitted to vote. This, of course, falls short of a complete democracy, but don't judge them too harshly: Slavery would not outlawed until 1814, when Mexico would become the very first sovereign nation to permanently ban slavery. The US wouldn't free its slaves until 1865 with the 13th amendment. And women didn't get to vote until New Zealand gave them the vote in 1893. It would take the US until 1919 and the 19th amendment. Unfortunately, at about the same time the democratic experiment began, the great Persian Empire to the east decided to expand into, first, Ionia, and then Greece proper. But in 490 bc, 20,000 Greeks defeated 100,000 Persian troops at Marathon, north of Athens. (A messenger named Pheidippides ran the 26 miles -- 42.195 km -- to Athens to give them the good news, hence the sport of marathon running!) In 481, the Persian emperor Xerxes sent an army of over two million men, assisted by a fleet of 1200 ships, to attack Greece again. The army ravaged the north of Greece and prepared to attack Athens. They found the city deserted. The Persian navy, however, found the Greek fleet waiting for it in the Bay of Salamis. The Greeks won the day against enormous odds. By 479, the Persians were forced back into Asia Minor. If this seems like just a little piece of history, consider: This victory allowed the Greek adventure to continue to produce the kind of thinking that would set the tone for the next two millennia in Europe and the Mediterranean. During the time period we are looking at in this chapter, Athens had as many as 300,000 people, making it one of the largest cities in the world. About half were free, one third were slaves, and one sixth were foreigners (metics). The free adult males who could vote numbered about 50,000. Socrates Socrates (470-399) was the son of a sculptor and a midwife, and served with distinction in the Athenian army during Athens' clash with Sparta. He married, but had a tendency to fall in love with handsome young men, in particular a young soldier named Alcibiades. He was, by all accounts, short and stout, not given to good grooming, and a lover of wine and conversation. His famous student, Plato, called him "the wisest, and justest, and best of all men whom I have ever known" (Phaedo). He was irritated by the Sophists and their tendency to teach logic as a means of achieving self-centered ends, and even more their promotion of the idea that all things are relative. It was the truth that he loved, desired, and believed in. Philosophy, the love of wisdom, was for Socrates itself a sacred path, a holy quest -- not a game to be taken lightly. He believed -- or at least said he did in the dialog Meno -- in the reincarnation of an eternal soul which contained all knowledge. We unfortunately lose touch with that knowledge at every birth, and so we need to be reminded of what we already know (rather than learning something new). He said that he did not teach, but rather served, like his mother, as a midwife to truth that is already in us! Making use of questions and answers to remind his students of knowledge is called maieutics (midwifery), dialectics, or the Socratic method. One example of his effect on philosophy is found in the dialog Euthyphro. He suggests that what is to be considered a good act is not good because gods say it is, but is good because it is useful to us in our efforts to be better and happier people. This means that ethics is no longer a matter of surveying the gods or scripture for what is good or bad, but rather thinking about life. He even placed individual conscience above the law -- quite a dangerous position to take! Socrates himself never wrote any of his ideas down, but rather engaged his students -- wealthy young men of Athens -- in endless conversations. In exchange for his teaching, they in turn made sure that he was taken care of. Since he claimed to have few needs, he took very little, much to his wife Xanthippe's distress. Plato reconstructed these discussions in a great set of writings known as the Dialogs. It is difficult to distinguish what is Socrates and what is Plato in these dialogs, so we will simply discuss them together. Socrates wasn't loved by everyone by any means. His unorthodox political and religious views gave the leading citizens of Athens the excuse they needed to sentence him to death for corrupting the morals of the youth of the city. In 399, he was ordered to drink a brew of poison hemlock, which he did in the company of his students. The event is documented in Plato's Apology. Socrates' final words were "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius (the god of medicine). Pay it and do not neglect it." Plato Plato (437-347) was Socrates' prized student. From a wealthy and powerful family, his actual name was Aristocles -- Plato was a nickname, referring to his broad physique. When he was about twenty, he came under Socrates' spell and decided to devote himself to philosophy. Devastated by Socrates' death, he wandered around Greece and the Mediterranean and was taken by pirates. His friends raised money to ransom him from slavery, but when he was released without it, they bought him a small property called Academus to start a school -- the Academy, founded in 386. The Academy was more like Pythagoras' community -- a sort of quasi-religious fraternity, where rich young students studied mathematics, astronomy, law, and, of course, philosophy. It was free, depending entirely on donations. True to his ideals, Plato also permitted women to attend! The Academy would become the center of Greek learning for almost a millennium. Plato can be understood as idealistic and rationalistic, much like Pythagoras but much less mystical. He divides reality into two: On the one hand we have *ousia*, idea or ideal. This is ultimate reality, permanent, eternal, spiritual. On the other hand, there's phenomena, which are a manifestation of the ideal. Phenomena are appearances -- things as they seem to us -- and are associated with matter, time, and space. Phenomena are illusions which decay and die. Ideals are unchanging, perfect. Phenomena are definitely inferior to Ideals! The idea of a triangle -- the defining mathematics of it, the form or essence of it -- is eternal. Any individual triangle, the triangles of the day-to-day experiential world, are never quite perfect: They may be a little crooked, or the lines a little thick, or the angles not quite right.... They only approximate that perfect triangle, the ideal triangle. If it seems strange to talk about ideas or ideals as somehow more real than the world of our experiences, consider science. The law of gravity, 1+1=2, "magnets attract iron," E=mc², and so on -- these are universals, not true for one day in one small location, but true forever and everywhere! If you believe that there is order in the universe, that nature has laws, you believe in ideas! Ideas are available to us through thought, while phenomena are available to us through our senses. So, naturally, thought is a vastly superior means to get to the truth. This is what makes Plato a rationalist, as opposed to an empiricist, in epistemology. Senses can only give you information about the ever-changing and imperfect world of phenomena, and so can only provide you with implications about ultimate reality, not reality itself. Reason goes straight to the idea. You "remember," or intuitively recognize the truth, as Socrates suggested in the dialog Meno. According to Plato, the phenomenal world strives to become ideal, perfect, complete. Ideals are, in that sense, a motivating force. In fact, he identifies the ideal with God and perfect goodness. God creates the world out of material, matter and shapes it according to his "plan" or "blueprint" -- ideas or the ideal. If the world is not perfect, it is not because of God or the ideals, but because the raw materials were not perfect. I think you can see why the early Christian church made Plato an honorary Christian, even though he died three and a half centuries before Christ! Plato applies the same dichotomy to human beings: There's the body, which is material, mortal, and "moved" (a victim of causation). Then there's the soul, which is ideal, immortal, and "unmoved" (enjoying free will). The soul includes reason, of course, as well as self-awareness and moral sense. Plato says the soul will always choose to do good, if it recognizes what is good. This is a similar conception of good and bad as the Buddhists have: Rather than bad being sin, it is considered a matter of ignorance. So, someone who does something bad requires education, not punishment. The soul is drawn to the good, the ideal, and so is drawn to God. We gradually move closer and closer to God through reincarnation as well as in our individual lives. Our ethical goal in life is resemblance to God, to come closer to the pure world of ideas and ideal, to liberate ourselves from matter, time, and space, and to become more real in this deeper sense. Our goal is, in other words, self-realization. Plato talks about three levels of pleasure. First is sensual or physical pleasure, of which sex is a great example. A second level is sensuous or esthetic pleasure, such as admiring someone's beauty, or enjoying one's relationship in marriage. But the highest level is ideal pleasure, the pleasures of the mind. Here the example would be Platonic love, intellectual love for another person unswayed by physical involvement. Paralleling these three levels of pleasure are three souls. We have one soul called appetite, which is mortal and comes from the gut. The second soul is called spirit or courage. It is also mortal, and lives in the heart. The third soul is reason. It is immortal and resides in the brain. The three are strung together by the cerebrospinal canal. Plato is fond of analogies. Appetite, he says, is like a wild horse, very powerful, but likes to go its own way. Spirit is like a thoroughbred, refined, well trained, directed power. And reason is the charioteer, goal-directed, steering both horses according to his will. Other analogies abound, especially in Plato's greatest work, The Republic. In The Republic, he designs (through Socrates) a society in order to discover the meaning of justice. Along the way, he compares elements of his society (a utopia, Greek for "no place") to the three souls: The peasants are the foundation of the society. They till the soil and produce goods, i.e. take care of society's basic appetites. The warriors receive the spirit and courage of the society. And the philosopher kings guide the society, as reason guides our lives. Before you decide that we are just looking at a Greek version of the Indian caste system, please note: Everyone's children are raised together and membership in one of the three levels of society is based on talents, not on one's birth parents! And Plato includes women as men's equals in this system. I leave you with a few quotes: "Wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder. " "... (If you ask what is the good of education in general, the answer is easy; that education makes good men, and that good men act nobly." "(I) do to others as I would they should do to me." "Our object in the construction of the State is the greatest happiness of the whole, and not that of any one class." Aristotle Aristotle (384-322) was born in a small Greek colony in Thrace called Stagira. His father was a physician and served the grandfather of Alexander the Great. Presumably, it was his father who taught him to take an interest in the details of natural life. He was Plato's prize student, even though he disagreed with him on many points. When Plato died, Aristotle stayed for a while with another student of Plato, who had made himself a dictator in northern Asia Minor. He married the dictator's daughter, Pythias. They moved to Lesbos, where Pythias died giving birth to their only child, a daughter. Although he married again, his love for Pythias never died, and he requested that they be buried side by side. For four years, Aristotle served as the teacher of a thirteen year old Alexander, son of Philip of Macedon. In 334, he returned to Athens and established his school of philosophy in a set of buildings called the Lyceum (from a name for Apollo). The beautiful grounds and covered walkways were conducive to leisurely walking discussions, so the students were named for the peripatoi ("covered walkways"). First, we must point out that Aristotle was as much a scientist as a philosopher. He was endlessly fascinated with nature, and went a long way towards classifying the plants and animals of Greece. He was equally interested in studying the anatomies of animals and their behavior in the wild. Aristotle also pretty much invented modern logic. Except for its symbolic form, it is essentially the same today. Let's begin with metaphysics: While Plato separates the ever-changing phenomenal world from the true and eternal ideal reality, Aristotle suggests that the ideal is found "inside" the phenomena, the universals "inside" the particulars. What Plato called idea or ideal, Aristotle called essence, and its opposite, he referred to as matter. Matter is without shape or form or purpose. It is just "stuff," pure potential, no actuality. Essence is what provides the shape or form or purpose to matter. Essence is "perfect," "complete," but it has no substance, no solidity. Essence and matter need each other! Essence realizes ("makes real") matter. This process, the movement from formless stuff to complete being, is called entelechy, which some translate as actualization. There are four causes that contribute to the movement of entelechy. They are answers to the question "why?" or "what is the explanation of this?" 1. The material cause: what something is made of. 2. The efficient cause: the motion or energy that changes matter. 3. The formal cause: the thing's shape, form, or essence; its definition. 4. The final cause: its reason, its purpose, the intention behind it. 1. The material cause: The thing's matter or substance. Why a bronze statue? The metal it is made of. Today, we find an emphasis on material causation in reductionism, explaining, for example, thoughts in terms of neural activity, feelings in terms of hormones, etc. We often go down a "level" because we can't explain something at the level it's at. 2. The efficient cause: The motion or energy that changes matter. Why the statue? The forces necessary to work the bronze, the hammer, the heat, the energy.... This is what modern science focuses on, to the point where this is what cause now tends to mean, exclusively. Note that modern psychology usually relies on reductionism in order to find efficient causes. But it isn't always so: Freud, for example, talked about psychosexual energy and Skinner talked about stimulus and response. 3. The formal cause: The thing's shape, form, definition, or essence. Why the statue? Because of the plan the sculptor had for the bronze, its shape or form, the non-random ordering of its matter. In psychology, we see some theorists focus on structure -- Piaget and his schema, for example. Others talk about the structure inherent in the genetic code, or about cognitive scripts. 4. The final cause: The end, the purpose, the teleology of the thing. Why the statue? The purpose of it, the intention behind making it. This was popular with medieval scholars: They searched for the ultimate final cause, the ultimate purpose of all existence, which they of course labeled God! Note that, outside of the hard sciences, this is often the kind of cause we are most interested in: Why did he do it, what was his purpose or intention? E.g. in law, the bullet may have been the "efficient" cause of death, but the intent of the person pulling the trigger is what we are concerned with. When we talk about intentions, goals, values, and so on, we are talking about final causes. Aristotle wrote the first book on psychology (as a separate topic from the rest of philosophy). It was called, appropriately, *Peri Psyches*, Greek for "about the mind or soul." It is better known in the Latin form, *De Anima*. In this book, we find the first mentions of many ideas that are basic to psychology today, such as the laws of association. In it, he says the mind or soul is the "first entelechy" of the body, the "cause and principle" of the body, the realization of the body. We might put it like this: The mind is the purposeful functioning of the nervous system. Like Plato, he postulates three kinds of souls, although slightly differently defined. There is a plant soul, the essence of which is nutrition. Then there is an animal soul, which contains the basic sensations, desire, pain and pleasure, and the ability to cause motion. Last, but not least, is the human soul. The essence of the human soul is, of course, reason. He suggests that, perhaps, this last soul is capable of existence apart from the body. He foreshadowed many of the concepts that would become popular only two thousand years later. Libido, for example: "In all animals... it is the most natural function to beget another being similar to itself... in order that they attain as far as possible, the immortal and divine.... This is the final cause of every creature's natural life." And the struggle of the id and ego: "There are two powers in the soul which appear to be moving forces -- desire and reason. But desire prompts actions in violation of reason... desire... may be wrong." And the pleasure principle and reality principle: "Although desires arise which are opposed to each other, as is the case when reason and appetite are opposed, it happens only in creatures endowed with a sense of time. For reason, on account of the future, bids us resist, while desire regards the present; the momentarily pleasant appears to it as the absolutely pleasant and the absolutely good, because it does not see the future." And finally, self-actualization: We begin as unformed matter in the womb, and through years of development and learning, we become mature adults, always reaching for perfection. "So the good has been well explained as that at which all things aim." © Copyright 2000, 2009, C. George Boeree

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