World History Name:

Mr. Murray Block:

Athens #4: Philosophy Date

*Who are we? How can we be happy? Does the universe have a purpose?* [**Greek**](http://www.ancient.eu/greek/) philosophers approached the big questions of life sometimes in a genuine scientific way, sometimes in mystic ways, but always in an imaginative fashion. [**Pythagoras**](http://www.ancient.eu/Pythagoras/) considered a charlatan for claiming the doctrine of reincarnation, a half-naked [**Socrates**](http://www.ancient.eu/socrates/) haranguing people in the street with provocative and unanswerable questions, [**Aristotle**](http://www.ancient.eu/aristotle/) tutoring great generals: these are examples of how Greek thinkers dared to question traditional conventions and to challenge the prejudices of their age, sometimes putting their own lives at stake. [**Greek Philosophy**](http://www.ancient.eu/Greek_Philosophy/) as an independent cultural genre began around 600 BCE, and its insights still persist to our times.

THE PRE-SOCRATICS

About 600 BCE, the Greek [**cities**](http://www.ancient.eu/cities/) of [**Ionia**](http://www.ancient.eu/ionia/) were the intellectual and cultural leaders of [**Greece**](http://www.ancient.eu/greece/) and the number one sea-traders of the [**Mediterranean**](http://www.ancient.eu/mediterranean/). Miletus, the southernmost Ionian [**city**](http://www.ancient.eu/city/), was the wealthiest of Greek cities and the main focus of the “Ionian awakening”, a name for the initial phase of classical Greek [**civilization**](http://www.ancient.eu/civilization/), coincidental with the birth of Greek [**philosophy**](http://www.ancient.eu/philosophy/).

The first group of Greek philosophers is a triad of Milesian thinkers: Thales, [**Anaximander**](http://www.ancient.eu/Anaximander/), and [**Anaximenes**](http://www.ancient.eu/Anaximenes/). Their main concern was to come up with a cosmological theory purely based on natural phenomena. Their approach required the rejection of all traditional explanations based on religious authority, dogma, myth and superstition. They all agreed on the notion that all things come from a single “primal substance”: Thales believed it was water; Anaximander said it was a substance different from all other known substances, “infinite, eternal and ageless”; and Anaximenes claimed it was air.

Observation was important among the Milesian school. Thales predicted an eclipse which took place in 585 BCE and it seems he had been able to calculate the distance of a ship at sea from observations taken at two points. Anaximander, based on the fact that human infants are helpless at birth, argued that if the first human had somehow appeared on earth as an infant, it would not have survived: therefore, humans have evolved from other animals whose offspring are fitter. The [**science**](http://www.ancient.eu/science/) among Milesians was stronger than their philosophy and somewhat crude, but it encouraged observation in many subsequent thinkers and was also a good stimulus to approach in a rational fashion many of the traditional questions that had previously been answered through [**religion**](http://www.ancient.eu/religion/) and superstition. The Ionian rational view caused nothing but perplexity among some of their powerful neighbours such as the Babylonians and Egyptians, which were nations based on theocratic governments where religion played an important political and social role.

Pythagoras is considered one of the Ionian thinkers but outside the Milesian school: he was originally from Samos, an offshore Ionian settlement. His approach combines science with religious beliefs, something that would have caused horror among the Milesian school. His philosophy has a dose of mysticism, probably an influence of the Orphic tradition. Mathematics, in the sense of demonstrative deductive arguments, begins with Pythagoras: he is credited as the author of the first known mathematical formulation, the theorem which states that the square of the longest side of a right triangle equals the sum of the squares of the other two sides. Deductive reasoning from general premises seems to have been a Pythagorean innovation.

Atomism began with Leucippus and [**Democritus**](http://www.ancient.eu/Democritus/). Among the ancient schools, this approach is the closest to modern science: they believed that everything is composed of atoms, which are indestructible and physically indivisible. They were strict determinists, who believed that everything happens in accordance with natural laws and the universe, they said, has no purpose and is nothing more than a mixture of infinite atoms being shuffled and re-shuffled according to the indifferent rules of nature. What is interesting about this school is that it attempted to understand the universe as objectively as possible and minimize intellectual deviations in favour of cultural and mystic prejudices.

THE RISE OF [ATHENS](http://www.ancient.eu/Athens/): THE SOPHISTS & SOCRATES

About 500 BCE, the Greek city-states or [***poleis***](http://www.ancient.eu/poleis/) were still largely divided. They had a common language and culture, but they were very often rivals. Some years earlier, Athens implemented a socio-political innovation by which all free male citizens had equal rights regardless of their origin and fortune. They named it democracy. Before the time of democracy, government decision-making was in the hands of a few, often aristocratic and noble families. Democracy allowed all free citizens to be part of the important decisions of the [**polis**](http://www.ancient.eu/Polis/). They could engage in the discussions held during deliberative assembly and tribunals, their voices could be heard everywhere and had the same value as any other voice. In this context, speech was king: being able to discuss different topics effectively and to persuade others, granted a competitive advantage. This was true not only of citizens actively involved in politics, but for any other citizen. During court hearings, for example, prosecutor and accused had to appear in court in person, never through lawyers, and the failure or success of the process relied largely on rhetorical skills and any citizen could be subject to a court hearing. This period, therefore, saw the beginning of the Sophist school.

***BEFORE THE TIME OF SOCRATES, PHILOSOPHERS’ MAIN CONCERN HAD BEEN THE PHYSICAL WORLD AND HOW TO EXPLAIN IT NATURALLY. HOWEVER, SOCRATES SET IN MOTION A NEW APPROACH BY FOCUSING ENTIRELY ON MORAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL QUESTIONS.***

The Sophists were intellectuals who taught courses in various topics, including rhetoric, a useful skill in Athens. Because they taught in return for a fee, the Sophists’ schools were only attended by those who could afford it, usually members of the aristocracy and wealthy families. This was a time of profound political and social change in Athens: democracy had replaced the old way of doing politics and many aristocrats whose interests were affected were trying to destroy the democracy; the rapid increase of wealth and culture, mainly due to foreign commerce, undermined traditional beliefs and morals. In a way, the Sophists represented the new political era in Athenian life, especially because they were linked with the new educational needs.

Caught in the clash between cultural conservatism and innovation, we find a peculiar character: Socrates, the pivotal figure in Greek philosophy and the wisest among Greeks at his time according to the oracle of [**Delphi**](http://www.ancient.eu/delphi/). Like the Sophists, Socrates enjoyed teaching, but unlike the Sophists he never requested a fee in return and lived a life of austerity. He either underestimated or ignored most of the topics that were popular among his predecessors. Before the time of Socrates, philosophers’ main concern had been the physical world and how to explain it naturally. However, Socrates set in motion a new approach by focusing entirely on moral and psychological questions. His methodology sought to define key questions such as: *what is virtue? what is patriotism? what do you mean by morality?* As a result of this, most of his debates ended up with even more questions, the central issue unanswered, and the disputers’ ignorance on many topics revealed, since he invariably proved that the words being used by his contenders were actually abstract terms with an empty meaning.

By combining a humble spirit (he never claimed to be any wiser than anyone else) and a strict agnosticism (he said he knew nothing) with a method that challenged conventional assumptions and an intolerance for unclear thinking, Socrates gradually earned enemies from various sectors of Athenian society. He was, consequently, put on trial and condemned to death. However,  Athenians did not like to condemn a citizen to death, therefore, this was merely a formal sentence and he was offered the possibility to escape. He refused to do so and obeyed the jury’s decision: a mixture containing poison hemlock took away his life, but his example granted him immortality.

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Plato

[PLATO](http://www.ancient.eu/plato/) & ARISTOTLE

Plato and Aristotle are the two most important Greek philosophers. Their work has been the main focus of interest for students of philosophy and specialists. This is partly because, unlike most of their predecessors, what they wrote survived in an accessible form and partly because Christian thought, which was the dominant thought in the Western world during the Middle Ages and early modern age, contained a high dose of Platonic and Aristotelian influence.

Plato was a student of Socrates who left Athens disgusted by the death of his teacher. After travelling for many years, he returned to Athens and opened his famous Academy. He is the best known Greek philosopher; the triumph of his work has been so complete and influential in western philosophy, that the famous quote from Alfred North Whitehead, although an exaggeration, is not far from the truth: “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”

Plato had many philosophical interests including ethics and politics but he is best known for his metaphysical and epistemological ideas. One of his most influential insights is the Theory of Ideas: to Plato, notions like virtue, justice, beauty, goodness, etc., would not be possible unless we had some direct knowledge of these things in an earlier existence. We are born into this world with an imperfect memory of these Forms. In that ideal world of Ideas, one can experience the real Forms which are perfect and universal. Our world is an imperfect parody of the Platonic flawless and superior world of Ideas. A knowledge of these Forms is possible only through long and arduous study by philosophers but their eventual enlightenment will qualify them, and they alone, to rule society.

Aristotle, a student of Plato for almost 20 years, was the tutor of [**Alexander the Great**](http://www.ancient.eu/Alexander_the_Great/). Aristotle’s interests covered a wide scope: ethics, metaphysics, physics, biology, mathematics, meteorology, astronomy, psychology, politics and rhetoric, among other topics.  Aristotle was the first thinker who systematically developed the study of logic. Some of the components of Aristotelian logic existed long before Aristotle such as Socrates’ ideas on exact definition, argumentative techniques found in [**Zeno of Elea**](http://www.ancient.eu/Zeno_of_Elea/), [**Parmenides**](http://www.ancient.eu/Parmenides/) and Plato, and many other elements traceable to legal reasoning and mathematical proof. Aristotle’s logic system consists of five treatises known as the Organon, and although it does not exhaust all logic, it was a pioneering one, revered for centuries and regarded as the ultimate solution to logic and reference for science. Aristotle’s contribution in logic and science became an authority and remained unchallenged as late as the modern age: we can recall Galileo who, after careful observation during the Renaissance, came to the conclusion that most of the Aristotelian physics and astronomy was not in line with the empirical evidence and yet, Galileo’s ideas were widely rejected by his contemporary Aristotelian scholars. Even during the most obscure times during the Middle Ages, a copy of the Organon, or maybe fragments of it, could be found in all prestigious libraries.

**[](http://www.ancient.eu/image/1259/)**

[Aristotle](http://www.ancient.eu/image/1259/)