

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle

Greek Philosophers Developed Ideas that Are Still Used Today

Directions:

- Scan the article by reading the bold headings, looking at the images and reading the captions.
- Then turn the bold headings for each section into questions (see *the example on the first section*).
- Then, read the article, circling words you don't know and defining them in terms you understand... in the margin.
- After that, reread the article and highlight the sentence in each section that answers the questions you created.
- On a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions at the end of the article in complete sentences (embed the question). Highlight (in a second color) where you found answers to item #s 1 and 2.

The Origins of Western Thought What were the origins of Western thought?

People who live in Europe and the Americas owe a great deal to the ancient Greeks...even the way they think about the world was shaped by these ancient people. Greek thinkers of that time believed the human mind could understand everything. Such people were and are called philosophers. The word **philosophy** comes from the Greek word for "love of wisdom." The work of these early thinkers laid the foundations for such areas of study as mathematics, science, history, and political science. Many of these philosophers were also teachers. One of the earliest and greatest of the teacher-philosophers was Socrates.

The Ideas of Socrates

Socrates was a sculptor who lived in Athens. His true love was not carving stone but instead shaping minds. He left no writings behind, and what we know about him comes from the writings of his students.

Socrates believed that absolute truth existed and that all real knowledge was within each person. All it would take to get that knowledge out was a series of questions. He invented the Socratic method of teaching still used today. He asked pointed questions, forcing his students to use their reason to see things for themselves.

Athens Versus Socrates

Some leaders of Athens considered the Socratic method a threat to their power. People were using it to question everything, even the actions of the city's leaders. At one time, Athens had a tradition of questioning leaders and speaking freely. However, when Athens lost to Sparta in the Peloponnesian War, Athenian leaders changed their thinking. They no longer trusted open debate. In 399 B.C. the leaders accused Socrates of teaching young Athenians to rebel against the city-state. A jury found Socrates guilty and sentenced him to death. Socrates could have fled the city, but he chose to remain. He argued that he had lived under the city's laws, so he had to obey them. He then drank poison made from the hemlock plant to carry out the jury's sentence.



The highly poisonous Hemlock plant...a relative of the carrot. It's Latin name is *Conium maculatum*. "Conium" comes from the Greek *konas* (meaning to whirl), a reference to vertigo, one of the symptoms of eating the plant.



The Death of Socrates, by the painter Jacques-Louis David (1787). Some scholars believe that Socrates may have been an invention of the philosopher Plato since the only record of Socrates seems to come from Plato's writings.

The Ideas of Plato

One of Socrates' students was a man named Plato.

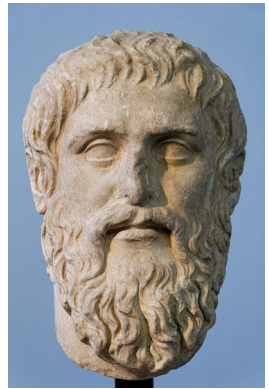
Unlike Socrates, Plato left many writings behind. One work is called the *Republic*. It explains Plato's thoughts about the ideal government. Based on life in Athens, Plato decided that democracy was not a good system of government. He did not think that rule by the ordinary people

produced fair and sensible policies. In Plato's opinion, people could not live good lives unless they had a just and reasonable government. He thought democracy led to mob rule and chaos. For proof he pointed to the democracy in Athens who had sentenced his teacher to death.

Plato's Ideal Society

In the *Republic*, Plato described his ideal government. He divided people into three basic groups. At the top were the philosopher-kings, who ruled using logic and wisdom. Warriors made up the second group. They defended the state from attack. The third group included the rest of the people. They were driven by desire, not by wisdom like the first group or courage like the second. This third group produced the state's food, clothing, and shelter. Plato also believed that men and women should have the same education and an equal chance to have the same jobs.

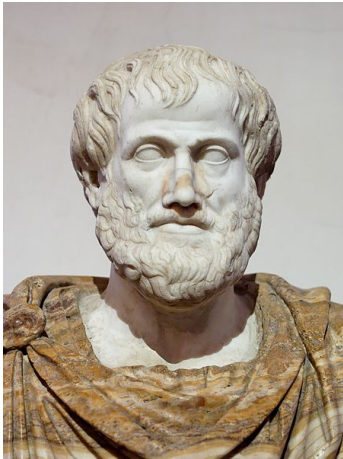
A bust of Plato by Silanion, a famous Greek sculptor from the fourth century BC. Plato belonged to an aristocratic family in Athens. Legend has it that he got the name "Plato" from a wrestling coach, Ariston of Argos, who called him Platon, meaning "broad," because of his robust figure.



The Expertise of Aristotle

Plato established a school in Athens known as the Academy. His best student was Aristotle. Over his life, Aristotle wrote more than 200 books on topics ranging from government to the planets and stars. In 335 B.C. Aristotle opened his own school called the Lyceum. At the Lyceum Aristotle taught his students the "golden mean." According to this idea, a person should do nothing to excess. For example, a person should not eat too little or too much but just enough to stay well.

Aristotle also helped to advance science. He urged people to use their senses to make observations, just as scientists today make observations. Aristotle was the first person to group observations according to their similarities and differences. Then he made generalizations based on the group of facts.



This marble bust of Aristotle is a Roman copy of one created by the Greek artist Lysippus. Aristotle means "best purpose," and he certainly found his purpose in thinking. He wrote on just about every subject under the sun and his ideas would fill hundreds of books. Scholars believe that perhaps only a third of Aristotle's original writings have been discovered. The king of Macedonia, Philip, hired Aristotle to tutor his son, Alexander (who went on to become "Alexander the Great").

Aristotle on Government

Like Plato, Aristotle also wrote about government. He studied and compared the government of 158 different places to find the best form of government. In his book *Politics*, Aristotle divided the governments into three types:

- Government by one person such as a monarch or a tyrant.
- Government by a few people, which might be an aristocracy or an oligarchy.
- Government by many people like in a democracy.

Aristotle noticed that governments run by a few people were usually run by the rich. He noticed that most democracies

were run by the poorer citizens. He thought the best government would be a monarchy or an aristocracy, but only if the rulers did not abuse their power, which they often did. Therefore, Aristotle thought the safest government was a mixture of aristocracy and democracy that might be run by a middle class.

Aristotle's ideas represent the influence of Ancient Greek philosophers. For example, the framers of the United States Constitution tried to create a mixed government that balanced the needs and ambitions of the different types of people Aristotle had identified. Governments that have developed over time in Europe and the Americas also reflect the ideas of Aristotle and other ancient Greek "lovers of wisdom."

Questions

1. What group did Plato think should run society? What argument did he have against democracy and why?
2. Explain Aristotle's "golden mean." What did Aristotle believe was the best form of government? How did he reach this conclusion?
3. (Paragraph) Of the three philosophers discussed here, which in your opinion had the most profound impact on our society? Please provide several reasons and cite your evidence.