What the Tortoise Taught Us

The Story of Philosophy

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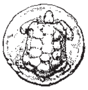
CHAPTER ONE



The Beginning of Reflection

Glimpses of Light: Ancient Philosophy

According to one account, philosophy began on May 28, 585 BCE, at 3:15 in the afternoon. To be that precise about something so abstract seems absurd, but at that time an ancient Greek thinker named Thales confirmed his theory of a solar eclipse. He had observed the movements of the heavens and noticed a regularity that allowed him to predict that darkness would cover the earth at midday. Instead of simply accepting the world as a jumble of unrelated events, he tried to make sense of it all, to understand the underlying principles. He felt the need to find a reason why things happened as they did, and that search for hidden order was vindicated by the eclipse. In this sense, the account is true. Philosophy does begin where acceptance ends, when we try to understand life more deeply and ask why things are the way they are. Beyond eclipses, we wonder where we fit in the scheme of things, both as human beings and as individuals, whether there is any meaning or value to our lives. Did the world and everything in it come about by chance, or is there an underlying purpose to our being?

We wonder whether there is a God who created life in accordance with a grand cosmic plan, so that everything happens for a reason, including the death of those we love. We ask ourselves how we should live, what would be fulfilling, and what obligations we have to other people. Is there life beyond the grave where we will receive our just reward, or should we make the most of our time on earth because there is nothing more?

Whenever we speculate about such fundamental questions, and try to find answers by deep and careful thought, then we are engaged in philosophy. And it was the ancient Greeks who first raised such issues, reflecting on them in a systematic way; they took the first steps in philosophic thinking, asking the questions we still debate today.

None of the information we have about the early Greeks is certain, of course, because we have to piece together their story from fragments of writings that have survived. For example, we have 150 lines of the philosopher Parmenides, 340 of Empedocles, and about 300 fragments of Democritus. We also have to rely on summaries written by ancient historians, such as Plutarch, Iambichus, and Herodotus, and commentaries of later philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, and Seneca. What's more, some of the accounts are contradictory and no source has been judged completely reliable. Nevertheless, we do know enough for an approximation to be made, and we have to celebrate what was saved instead of regretting what has been lost.

Thales

The philosopher Thales, who lived in the sixth century BCE, is classified as one of the "pre-Socratics" because he preceded (the better-known) Socrates a century earlier. His home was in Ionia, on the west coast of Asia Minor, a region the Greeks had colonized. More specifically, he was a resident of the city-state of Miletus, a small Greek seaport, and his philosophic ideas are therefore part of the Milesian school. He probably visited Egypt at one time, studying their astronomy and mathematics, and he may have developed a theory for the rise and fall of the Nile, as well as a method for calculating the height of pyramids. We know he measured the distance of ships at sea and taught sailors to navigate by the Big Bear constellation. In fact, he compiled whole star charts, which meant that he had celestial records from Babylonia.

We also know that he split the waters of a river to make it shallow enough for an army to cross:

> Beginning upwards of the army he dug a deep channel, giving it a crescent shape, so that it should flow round the back of where the army was encamped. . . . The result was that as soon as the river was divided it became fordable in both of its parts.

On another occasion he made a fortune by predicting a bumper crop of olives.

> When he was reproached because of his poverty, as though philosophers were no use, it is said that, having observed through his study of the heavenly bodies

> that there would be a large olive crop, he raised a little capital while it was still winter and paid deposits on all the olive presses in Miletus and Chios, hiring them cheaply because no one bid against him. When the appropriate time came, there was a sudden rush of requests for the presses; he then hired them out on his own terms and so made a large profit, thus demonstrating that it was easy for philosophers to be rich, if they wished, but it was not in this that they were interested.

Despite this evidence of practicality, Thales had the reputation of being absentminded. According to one story, "[a] witty and attractive Thracian servant-girl mocked Thales for falling into a well while he was gazing upwards at the stars; she said that he was eager to know the things in the sky, but what was behind him and just by his feet escaped his notice." Although astronomy had made Thales rich, this has remained the stereotype of the philosopher—lost in the stars rather than having his feet on the ground.

Thales did engage in more serious speculation, specifically on what might be the fundamental "stuff" of the universe. At the time, the Greeks thought that air, earth, fire, and water were the basic elements, and that they could not be reduced to anything simpler. That did not satisfy Thales, who wanted to find a single world-stuff that would account for every other material thing. He wanted an element that was ultimate, lying at the heart of reality and responsible for the variety of natural forms.

Strangely enough, Thales chose water as the basic element, and evidence suggests that he devised an ingenious system of thought to justify his claim. Water gives rise to air through the process of evaporation, first transforming itself into mist or vapor. In that same process, water produces earth, because soil is left in dried-up pools, first in the form of mud. Thales must also have seen silt deposited at the mouth of rivers, especially the delta of rivers, and he thought underground springs showed earth becoming water once again. What's more, in volcanic eruptions we see liquid become solid as the molten lava cools, and when water freezes, of course, it becomes hard as rock.

The connection between water and fire must have been more difficult to explain because the two seem to be opposites. However, Thales pointed out that the sun bakes the earth, drawing the liquid into itself so that water becomes fire. Furthermore, there is a connection between water and fire in thunderstorms: the rain causes the lightning—fire in a liquid sky. The sun's rays produce drops of water on cold objects, and lightning has an attraction for water as we can see when it strikes lakes or oceans.

Not only can water account for air, earth, and fire, but Thales believed the earth originated from water and now floated upon it like a raft; if you dig deep enough, you can find the water underneath the soil and build a well.

Storms at sea make the land move because “the world is held up by water and rides like a ship, and when it is said to ‘quake’ it is actually rocking because of the water’s movement.” He might have added that earthquakes can make the oceans move, forcing tsunamis onto the land.

Thales probably observed that the seeds of animals are wet and that wriggling organisms are left in mud pools, so that life might have begun in water. Today we know that life did first appear as specks of protoplasm in the scum of tides, acted on by the sun’s rays, the “primal soup.” We have also learned that all plants and animals need water to survive, so when we search for life on other planets, we first look for signs of water. The human body itself is largely made up of water: up to 60 percent for men, 65 percent for women, and 70 percent for infants.

All parts of the earth were watery to Thales, which meant to his mind that they were permeated with a life principle that made them divine. In one fragment he wrote, “All things are full of gods.” This identification of water and spirits might have come from the Egyptian notion that the world was created by Nun, the goddess of primeval waters. As the Nile flooded and receded each year, the land miraculously reappeared. Thales does refer to gods, but at bottom he did not think of the world as spiritual but material. The gods were impersonal to him, and the divinity of the universe consisted in its agelessness, power, and freedom from human limitations. This reality was understood through observation and hypotheses, not from scripture or revelation.

Obviously, many of Thales’ ideas were mistaken, even though they were imaginative and consistent. Water may be vital but it is not fundamental. But the important point is not whether he got it right, but that he was searching for a comprehensive explanation for the world of experience. Rather than taking life at face value, he attempted to understand the underlying essence of things, the structure and development of physical reality. For that reason Thales is considered the first philosopher, and to neglect his thought or that of the other pre-Socratics is like entering into the middle of a conversation.

Thales’ assumptions are certainly not outmoded, for today we also assume we can discover a single explanation for all of creation. To some this ultimate reality is the atom and molecular structure, to others energy and field of force, and to still others a unified field theory that will reconcile alternative models in physics. We also have the spiritual idea that love is basic, or that a divine being is the ultimate reality, creating everything we see and that which lies beyond our vision. Technically, this study of the nature of reality is called metaphysics.

Following Thales, other pre-Socratics offered alternative explanations of reality, motivated by the same desire for understanding. A fellow Milesian named Anaximander speculated about a cosmic stuff that he called "the Infinite" or "Indefinite," a material that was eternal and imperishable. Creation occurred when fire and dark mist separated from this "boundless." Democritus, a surprisingly modern thinker, postulated that atoms were the basic building blocks of matter—indivisible and imperceptible particles that combined to form the variety of objects, and Empedocles suggested that human beings evolved from lower forms of life, the first theory of evolution. Another pre-Socratic, Pythagoras, is considered "the father of numbers," even though he never wrote a mathematical equation.

Anaximenes named air or mist the basic element. The earth floated on air (we call it space now), and the variety of natural forms came about through rarefaction and condensation. If you breathe out with your mouth open, you produce warm air; purse your lips, and your breath is cool. That is why we blow on our hands to warm them in winter and blow on our soup to make it cooler. Medicine, too, has a quaint history of applying heat or cold, wet or dry, some of which is practiced today.

Heraclitus

One of the most interesting of the early Greek philosophers was a man named Heraclitus, who offered a very different model of reality. Instead of trying to identify some physical element as basic, he wondered what *process* characterized the natural world. That is, rather than asking whether air, earth, fire, or water was the most fundamental stuff, Heraclitus looked for a governing principle underlying them all.

A citizen of the Greek city of Ephesus (ca. 520–480 BCE), Heraclitus came from an aristocratic family but did not assume his traditional place in government. Rather, he withdrew from society and became a critic, ridiculing people for their stupidity. He detested philosophers in particular, which was a type of self-loathing. In both his life and his thought he appears to have been a self-styled curmudgeon. In his crabbed and cranky way he wrote, "The majority are contented like well-fed cattle, and asses (who) prefer chaff to gold." He was even eccentric enough to dismiss Hesiod and Homer as poor writers.

We know he had little regard for the religious practices of his day, including prayers to images and rites of atonement, and he especially ridiculed a cult called the Orphic Brotherhood. Here the worship centered round Orpheus, a legendary singer in Greek mythology who could charm even the animals, stones, and trees by the sweetness of his voice. In one tale, Orpheus rescued his wife, Eurydice, from the Underworld with his singing. As a mystery religion, the cult promised life after death, symbolized by a cosmic egg with a serpent coiled around it. The soul could break the shell and ascend along the serpent spirals to live forever with the gods; it could be released from the prison of the body only through abstinence and rites of purification. To Heraclitus, such beliefs were unfounded, fostered by ignorance, desperation, and madness.

Heraclitus also appears to have been rather condescending and impatient with his countrymen. When his city-state banished someone he considered an outstanding citizen, he wrote sarcastically, "The Ephesians would do well to hang themselves, every adult man, and leave their city to adolescents, since they expelled Hermodorus, the worthiest man among them." Clearly, he never suffered fools gladly.

We have a number of writings of Heraclitus, or rather fragments of them, mostly in the form of epigrams—witty, pointed, condensed sayings that offer a glimpse into the workings of his mind. Because of the way in which they are written, we can identify with his personality and his thoughts twenty-five centuries later. He liked to hide his meanings, though, and some of his sayings are so obscure that they earned him the title of "the dark philosopher." Nevertheless, he wrote a book called *On Nature* that was clear and persuasive enough to win disciples.

When Heraclitus began his speculations, looking not for a material substance but a principle that applied to matter, he hit upon the idea of change. To his mind, motion and mutability characterized the earth. "All things flow" he wrote, meaning that nothing remains constant, that everything is mutable. Only the law of change does not change, because if it changed, then it would no longer be true that everything changes. But with that one exception, we live in a world that is transitory, dynamic, and ephemeral, and the only thing we can count on is that nothing stays the same or lasts forever.

There is something of Heraclitus in contemporary "chaos theory," which claims we cannot predict when changes, even small ones, will have extreme impact. This is the assumption behind the "Cleopatra's nose" theory of history of Blaise Pascal—"had it been shorter, the whole face of the world would have been changed"—as well as the "butterfly effect," first articulated by Edward Lorenz: that the flap of a butterfly's wings in China can set off a tornado in Texas. Chaos theory, though, looks for order in apparent randomness so that cascading events can be predicted, such as avalanches and earthquakes.

In any case, to Heraclitus the process of change took the form of development, maturity, and decay, and it applied to all things—plants and animals, houses and temples, monuments, theories, and civilizations. The bud on an apple tree turns into a blossom, the flower then becomes fruit, which is eaten by worms, and the worms are transformed into baby birds. Mountains are scoured by wind, water, and ice until they become the soil of valleys, just as human beings die and become one with dust. All animals perish and fertilize the soil, which grows plants for animals to eat, in an endless cycle of death and rebirth.

Water represents this process of change, not as the basic element, the way Thales imagined, but as a metaphor for change. The flow of water is like the flux of life, continuously in motion and constantly renewing itself. “It is not possible to step twice in the same river,” Heraclitus wrote. “Different waters flow.” That is, the second time one steps into the river, new water will have flowed from the source, so that it is no longer the same river. According to legend, one of his disciples went one better and said, “You cannot step *once* in the same river,” because the river changes between the intention and the act, and because you will have changed before your foot ever reaches the water. Between the thought and the deed lies an eternity.

Fire also symbolizes change, because it represents the flickering, waxing, and waning of things, comparable to the tide’s ebb and flow. Fire needs air to burn, steams water from wood, and leaves a residue of embers and smoke. People are fascinated by the way it transforms even hard coal into ashes while still remaining itself. We gaze at fire and watch it keep its identity while changing everything it touches.

In a deeper sense, Heraclitus did not think that every object changes, because something persists that survives change. He calls this underlying principle *logos*, which can be interpreted as balance, measure, or proportion. “In the beginning was the logos,” the book of Genesis states, which is usually translated as “word.” To Heraclitus, logos is the identity in difference that holds things together, keeps them from flying apart. It means that which maintains the unity of all objects despite continual change.

Sometimes the tree has leafy branches, sometimes bare ones, but it is still a tree; we renovate a house, but it is nothing other than that house; and people change throughout their lifetime, but they are still the same person from birth to death. Logos is that which maintains the interaction of opposites and continuity through change.

Heraclitus, in fact, saw life as a perpetual struggle between opposing forces: love and hate, selfishness and generosity, emotion and reason, will and imagination. “It is the forward and backward pull on the bow that makes the arrow fly,” he wrote. “War is the father of all, the king of all.” The absence of tension means death, so we should welcome strife, depending on logos to hold contrary forces in a creative tension.

In an enigmatic way, Heraclitus claimed that everything is identical when viewed in the right light. “Immortals are mortal, mortals are immortal,” “the path up and down are one and the same," and "day and night: they are one." More clearly, he wrote, "What is in opposition is in concert, and from what differs comes the most beautiful harmony." Perhaps he meant that even opposites can be considered the same because they are part of a cosmic equilibrium. Either/or has a Janus face.

As a mystical idea, Heraclitus's "unity of opposites" may be profound or simply nonsense—perhaps the type of irrationality he condemned in the Orphic Brotherhood. Death is not life, up is not down, and day is not night. We might doubt that "all things are one" even while we accept the notion that something binds the opposite parts of the universe together. What is apparent is that Heraclitus believed he had discovered an idea that no one else had the sense to grasp, and he complained bitterly that his originality was not recognized by his contemporaries. Arthur Schopenhauer, a nineteenth-century German philosopher, once said, "When modesty was invented it must have been a great day for fools, because everyone is supposed to behave as if he were one." Heraclitus, at least, did not suffer from that vice.

According to historical records (or legend), his death was very odd. To cure his dropsy, he asked to be covered in dung to draw the bad humors out of his body. "In one version the cow dung is wet and the philosopher drowns; in the second, it is dry and he is baked to death in the Ionian sun." This is as bizarre as the fate of Aeschylus, who was killed when an eagle dropped a tortoise on him, mistaking his bald head for a stone.

Parmenides

The cosmic picture painted by Heraclitus is one of continual movement, a restless and fleeting universe, continually *becoming* rather than being. He also thought, as Thales did, that reality was known through our senses, that we could access the truth through observation. However, another pre-Socratic, named Parmenides, disputed both ideas. He believed reality was fixed and unmoving, and rather than being perceived by our senses, it had to be understood by our mind. Technically, the controversy is called the many and the one.

Parmenides was a citizen of Elea, a Greek colony on the west coast of Italy, south of present-day Naples, and was born about 510–515 BCE, thirty years after Heraclitus. We have evidence that he was involved in business and politics, and might have been responsible for some of the prosperity of the city. Not much is known about his personal life, but apparently he traveled to various parts of the Greek world and at age sixty-five met Socrates in Athens. Socrates wrote of him,

> Parmenides seemed to me, in the words of Homer, a man to be reverenced and at the same time feared. For when I was a mere youth and he a very old man, I conversed with him, and he seemed to me to have an exceedingly wonderful depth of mind.

He appears to have been generally admired, because "a Parmenidean life" became a proverbial saying among the Greeks, meaning "something fine and noble."

Parmenides, coming from Elea, is part of the Eleatic school of philosophy; in fact, he is the chief figure. He enjoyed an almost mythical reputation in the ancient world, based largely on his philosophical poem, *On Nature*. The style of the poem is rather lofty, apparently following the model of Hesiod, "father of Greek didactic poetry," with stilted writing at odds with its content. Nevertheless, the ideas are rich and intriguing.

In the prologue Parmenides pretends he ascended in a chariot, guided by Sun maidens, to the home of a goddess; she then dictated verses to him, revealing the secrets of the universe:

> 'Tis necessary for thee to learn all things, both the abiding essence of persuasive truth, and men's opinions in which rests no true belief. . . . Come now I will tell thee—and do thou hear my word and heed it—what are the only ways of inquiry that lead to knowledge.

Parmenides then expounds his philosophy in hexameter verse, offering a combination of airy speculation and systematic, rational argument. On the more fanciful side he tells us that the mixture of dense and thin gives a white appearance to the Milky Way; that the earth is equally distant on all sides from other bodies, thereby resting in equilibrium; and that god is an orb of light with continuous heat, arching the sky. However, he also presents a clever theory of reality that philosophers have taken more seriously.

Parmenides was primarily concerned with attacking the Heraclitean theory that "all things flow," not because he wanted to distinguish himself from his predecessor, but because he was sincerely convinced that motion is impossible. Strange as it seems, reality for him was a changeless, timeless, compact, indivisible ball of homogeneous world stuff, without movement, gaps, or parts: "all is one."

Obviously, this is an extreme position, contrary to common sense. Nothing could be more obvious than that things change, and that objects are different from one another. Our senses tell us that movement happens all the time, but Parmenides rejected the validity of sense experience and argued that reason could prove the oneness of things, despite all appearances.

Essentially, he argued that a thing must either be or not be. But being cannot come from nonbeing, since something cannot come from nothing; nor can it change into nonbeing, since, by definition, nonbeing does not exist. Therefore, everything that is has always been, and cannot not be.

The implication is that we live in a fixed and frozen world, because in order for something to change, it would have to change into nothing. But nothing is not another thing; rather, it is no thing. It is an absence rather than a presence, and objects cannot change into that which is not.

Parmenides' logic is extremely abstract, and his conclusion counterintuitive: that there is no motion or change, no alteration or variety. "All these things are but names which mortals have given, believing them to be true—coming into being and passing away, being and not-being, change of place and alteration of bright color." Although most people feel certain that we live in a world of change, to Parmenides that belief is an illusion. Logically, whatever *is* exists as an eternal, immovable whole, a bloc universe "all together, one."

These ideas seemed far-fetched, requiring much more proof before anyone could accept them. That task was undertaken by Zeno of Elea (490–430 BCE), the prize pupil of Parmenides, who defended his master's ideas in a singular and startling way. He was a flamboyant character, and according to tradition, when a Sicilian tyrant tortured him to disclose the names of his political associates, he bit off his tongue with his teeth and spit it in the face of his torturer.

Zeno's defense of Parmenides took the form of paradoxes, all of which were designed to show that motion is impossible. These paradoxes have been given names such as "the flying arrow," "Achilles and the tortoise," "the dichotomy," and so forth. Each puzzle reduces the idea of change to absurdity, implying that if we analyze events rationally, all motion is seen to be impossible, and without motion there is no change.

The "flying arrow" is typical of Zeno's paradoxes. He reasons that for an arrow to move, it must go from where it is to where it is not, but if you think about it, nothing can ever be where it is not. Therefore the arrow, as well as everything else, will always remain where it is, fixed and stationary for all eternity.

If it is argued that the arrow was or will be where it is not, the same objection applies. Things cannot have been in any other place, since the only other place they could have been is where they are not, and there is no future place where they will be, since that could only be the place where they are not. Nothing can ever be where it is not, whether in the past or the future, so motion is impossible. In fact, since things are always where they are, there is no yesterday or tomorrow, but only a timeless instant of now.

This is the kind of argument that makes your head spin and gives philosophy a bad name. You can't accept it, but it's hard to fault the logic. In this particular case, however, the reasoning does seem flawed. Zeno's argument would be like claiming that tomorrow never comes, because it is always today. However, if today is Tuesday, we know that Wednesday will arrive, and then that will be today. In other words, although it is always today, the day that is today can change.

In the same way, it appears sensible to argue that you can't cut off the top of a tree. because, insofar as it is a tree, it will always have a top. But we know we can do that, so there must be something wrong with the thinking. The answer seems to be that, in a relative sense, a tree will always have a top, but in an absolute sense, we can cut off those topmost branches—the ones that have forked twigs and that discolored bark. Looking back, we see the tree still has a top, but we can still cut away that particular top. "Top of the tree" is an ambiguous phrase.

Another paradox, "Achilles and the tortoise," is more difficult to solve. Zeno argued that although Achilles was a swift runner, he could never win a race against a tortoise if the tortoise had a head start. For by the time Achilles reached the point where the tortoise began, the tortoise would have advanced a little bit farther, and by the time Achilles had covered that ground, the tortoise would have lurched forward a bit more. This process continues to infinity, of course, because Achilles must first reach the last place the tortoise has been. Therefore, he can never overtake the tortoise, much less win the race.

Zeno's argument "the dichotomy" is similar and easier to follow, although just as puzzling. In order to travel from one point to another, we must first go half the distance, but before we get to that halfway point, we have to go halfway first. This continues infinitely because there is always a half distance to go before we begin, which means we can never start.

I_I_I____I________I_____________I______________________________I

Although this is a more subtle argument, modern physics and mathematics have shown where Zeno went wrong. The flaw seems to lie in regarding space as discrete, when in fact it is continuous. That is, from a mathematical standpoint, space is infinitely divisible, but that numerical infinity can still be physically traversed.

What has the tortoise taught us? By means of flying arrows, races, and dichotomies, we are made to question what we see and take to be true. In true philosophic fashion, Zeno advises us to be skeptical of the world of seeming and appearing, and to search for the underlying reality. He may be wrong in what he claims, but he displays a genuine philosophic mentality in questioning the conventional view of reality.

This philosophic approach has been reinforced by contemporary science, which tells us that what we perceive is not always so. For example, we think the earth is standing still, but in truth it rotates on its axis, and the ground that we consider to be steady is constantly moving beneath our feet. We would swear the sun rises and sets, but it is the earth that turns, without our sensing it. In the same way, nothing seems more obvious than the solidity of things, especially dense rock, steel, and concrete, but according to physics, all objects are mainly space. And rather than their being stationary, as common sense tells us, everything is a whirling maelstrom of atoms.

We see purple mountains that are really green, a bent stick in the water that is actually straight, and railroad tracks merging in the distance, when in fact parallel lines never meet. And we would swear that we see the stars at night, but we never do. All we see is light emanating from the stars, and because of the vast distances of space, the stars we think we see may have ceased to exist by the time we see them. At best, we are looking at a ghostly image from the past, seeing what used to be.

Astronomers calculate there are five hundred billion stars in our galaxy alone, with orbiting planets that could sustain life, and there are one hundred billion galaxies. We see only a few of these, including the star we call the sun. But because it is ninety-three million miles away, its rays do not reach us for eight minutes, even though light travels at 186,281 miles per second. We certainly never see the sunrise or the sunset, but only the earth turn.

Sense experience, then, may not be enough; reality may not conform to our ordinary perception. If we are to grasp what is real, we need to question our customary beliefs. As Plato noted, part of the purpose of philosophy is to make people less sure about things and, at the same time, to expand their vision of possibilities. Or as Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) said, "The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to be worth stating, and to end up with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it." Then the hard work begins of examining ideas in a rational way, trying to figure out what is so, even if it seems absurd. Of course, if you do not care what is real and would just as soon believe in illusions, you can always gaze at the stars and think you are seeing them.

The Unexamined Life Is Not Worth Living: Socrates

Christianity has numerous martyrs, from Rudolf, broken on the wheel, to Ignatius, eaten by wild animals, to St. Sebastian, who was shot to death with arrows. Philosophy has essentially one—the ancient philosopher Socrates (470–399 BCE), who was condemned to die by drinking hemlock. According to a work called the *Phaedo,* he drank the poison cheerfully, discoursing about philosophy until the cold reached his heart. He was an old man by the standards of his time, and he seemed to think this was an honorable end—a fitting death for the way he had lived his life.

We know a great deal more about Socrates than we do about his predecessors, thanks largely to his celebrated pupil Plato and to the historian Xenophon. Born in fifth-century Athens, he was the son of Phaenarete, a midwife, and Sophroniscus, a sculptor or stonemason. This parentage prompted a number of comparisons in his later life. For example, his supporters said he brought ideas to birth, while his opponents thought he descended from Daedalus, the mythological image maker. Just as the sculptures of Daedalus ran away once they were completed, their arguments seemed to vanish in the face of Socratic questions.

We also know that Socrates received a typical education for his time in literature, music, and gymnastics, and studied under Archelaus, a native Athenian philosopher. He was also familiar with the Sophists, a group of pragmatic, itinerant teachers who gave instruction for worldly success, although they seemed more interested in the fees than the education. What's more, the Sophists used their rational skills to win arguments rather than gain understanding, so they came to represent the embodiment of distorted, dishonest thinking.

Apparently, Socrates was not an attractive-looking man: he was squat and stocky, with a round face, bulbous nose, and protruding eyes, which he rolled when he spoke. In Aristophanes' comic play *The Clouds*, he is shown descending from the sky in a basket and strutting about with splayed feet like a waterfowl. Aristophanes, in fact, portrays him as a ludicrous figure, operating a "thinking-shop" for young men who want to learn the "unjust logic."

On the other hand, Socrates is positively described in a Platonic dialogue called the *Symposium.* A man named Alcibiades compares him to a Silenus figure sold in the shops. The exterior was made of coarse clay, but the inside contained gold, which shone through openings in the surface.

Physically, Socrates seems to have been quite hardy, with great powers of endurance, wearing a thin garment in winter and summer and going barefoot, even in the winter campaigns. During the Peloponnesian War with Sparta, he served as a hoplite, or foot soldier, distinguishing himself for bravery at the battles of Potidaea, Delium, and Amphipolis. In two political disputes in Athens, according to Thucydides, he risked his life by refusing to sanction a mass trial of generals and by rejecting an illegal order by the Thirty Tyrants.

But rather than choosing a military career, with its austerity and discipline, it was the intellectual excitement of the city that appealed to Socrates. In conversations at the agora, or marketplace, he displayed a wonderful spirit and an ironic wit, softened by humaneness and generosity. He found the social life and the interplay of ideas exhilarating, and although he was moderate in food and wine, he could drink a great deal, continuing to philosophize as his companions slowly slipped under the table. By all accounts, he loved life, dining and talking in an urbane and genial way.

The Athenian city-state was not an ideal society in terms of justice and equality. Slavery was accepted as routine—in fact, it supported the economy—and women played a very subservient role. The highest aspiration for a woman was to be a wife rather than a slave or prostitute, and she had no political rights, first controlled by her father, then her husband. However, although parts of the population were clearly oppressed, Athens was a remarkably advanced culture, one of the first societies to establish democracy (in 508 BCE) and to stress the values of individuality, freedom, and the achievement of excellence. The Athenian city-state was considered the intellectual and cultural center of the ancient world, contributing immeasurably to Western civilization in astronomy, biology, mathematics, physics, government, politics, architecture, painting, literature, theater, and philosophy. It was this play of ideas that Socrates cherished, a city dedicated to the spirit of Athena, the goddess of wisdom.

The statesman Pericles (496–429 BCE) in his famous "Funeral Oration" describes, in idealized terms, the Athenian city-state:

> Our constitution is named a democracy, because it is not in the hands of the few but of the many. But our laws secure equal justice for all in their private disputes, and our public opinion welcomes and honors talent in every branch of achievement, not as a matter of privilege but on grounds of excellence alone. And as we give free play to all in our public life, so we carry the same spirit into our daily relations with one another. We have no black looks or angry words for our neighbor if he enjoys himself in his own way, and we abstain from the little acts of churlishness which, though they leave no mark, yet cause annoyance to who so notes them. Open and friendly in our private intercourse, in our public acts we keep strictly within the control of law. We acknowledge the restraint of reverence; we are obedient to whomsoever is set in authority, and to the laws, more especially to those which offer protection to the oppressed and those unwritten ordinances whose transgression brings shame.
>
> Yet ours is no work-a-day city only. No other provides so many recreations for the spirit—contests and sacrifices all the year round, and beauty in our public buildings to cheer the heart and delight the eye day by day.

Socrates' dedication to city life and philosophy must have been hard on his wife, Xanthippe, although she is sometimes described as a shrew. Socrates himself stated that having learned to live with Xanthippe, he would be able to cope with any other human being—like a horse trainer who has worked with wild horses. To bring in money, Socrates followed in his father's footsteps for a time, producing elegant statues, such as *The Three Graces,* which stood near the entrance to the Acropolis, but later he lived on a modest inheritance. He had three sons, perhaps by Xanthippe and by another wife, but he probably spent little time at home.

Early on he began to exhibit some psychic peculiarities. He would fall into trances, once standing in a fit of abstraction for a day, and throughout his life he heard a voice directing him. This daimon, or divine sign, told him what *not* to do, and it has been interpreted as either a spiritual force or a highly developed sense of morality. Some people have such a strong conscience that they experience it as a voice speaking from outside of themselves.

In a somewhat mystical sense, too, Socrates felt that he had a mission to perform for Apollo, a mission requiring philosophic thinking, and that it should be pursued not through writing, but through conversations with his fellow citizens. Writing was static, not the dynamic interaction he craved. He believed that he ought to devote his life to making the Athenians aware of their basic assumptions. He wanted people to reflect on the ideas they had accepted without thinking, to reason clearly about their actions and beliefs. "The unexamined life is not worth living," he stated, and he tried to make that credo part of Greek life. To believe only what is familiar and comfortable may be the line of least resistance but not the path of greatest advantage.

To pursue his philosophic calling, Socrates would corner prominent citizens and members of the government and ask them provocative questions: "What is the nature of justice?" "Do you think virtue can be taught?" "How would you define courage?" Conventional replies were usually given, and Socrates would then press further, asking for more adequate answers, sometimes forcing his opponents into self-contradictions. He was not looking for the definition of a word, but the meaning of the idea that the word represented.

Practicing this dialectic process of question and answer, known as the Socratic method, Socrates gathered round him a crowd of young men who enjoyed seeing powerful people challenged. They wanted the pompous deflated and took delight in being in on the kill. Furthermore, they imitated his method and asked questions of officials on their own. Of course, the people who were interrogated did not enjoy being publicly humiliated, and since they held positions of power, they became dangerous enemies.

This animosity did not deter Socrates, partly because he believed he had a divine calling to promote reflection. In fact, engraved on the great shrine at

Delphi were the words "Know Thyself." But people do not thank you for exposing their ignorance, and at the same time that he gained disciples among the young, he became increasingly unpopular with the authorities.

Socrates thought of himself as the "gadfly" (horsefly) of Athens, a necessary irritant, making the society self-aware.

> The State is like a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has given to the State and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you.

Just as the gadfly stings the sluggish horse into activity, the Socratic mission was to make the state conscious of its underlying beliefs.

By the time he was in his thirties, Socrates had acquired a mixed reputation, as a troublemaker but a wise man. The latter label probably made him more uncomfortable. Even though the Delphic oracle had told one of his admirers, Charephon, that no one was wiser than he, Socrates was acutely conscious of his shortcomings. Therefore, he interpreted this declaration to mean that although he was as ignorant as other people, at least he was aware of his ignorance. In that respect, in knowing how little he knew, he possessed a certain advantage. The moral seems to be that wisdom consists in realizing your limitations, and not pretending to know more than you do—especially to yourself.

Plato (428–347 BCE) was Socrates' principal disciple, and he undertook to record a number of the philosophic conversations between Socrates and other thinkers. Hence we have a series of books known as the Platonic dialogues. Usually they are named for the person with whom Socrates is speaking, so we have the *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras*, *Meno*, *Parmenides*, and so forth. Sometimes they are named for topics, such as the *Apology* and, most importantly, the *Republic*. The dialogue called the *Symposium* is a beautiful blend of poetry and philosophy, and shows Plato's literary powers at their finest.

However, a problem exists with regard to the authorship of the ideas the books contain. Rather than faithfully recording his teacher's thoughts, Plato inserted many of his own ideas into the dialogues, using Socrates as his spokesman. This is called the "problem of Socrates"—the difficulty of knowing where one man leaves off and the other begins. The problem is exacerbated because Plato himself never speaks directly. To differentiate between the two, some commentators use the subject matter, and others use chronology, identifying early and late dialogues. Generally, dialogues such as the *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, and *Crito* seem more faithful to Socrates, whereas the later ones, such as the *Sophist*, *Timaeus*, and *Protagoras*, are more Platonic.

However, most commentators agree that Plato provided the main ideas while Socrates furnished the spirit, method, and style of the dialogues.

In any case, we know that animosity built up against Socrates among influential Athenians. He was widely considered a disruptive force, not just a nuisance, but a threat to the well-being of the society. By the fourth century BCE the Athenians were in an ugly mood, anyway, having suffered a bitter and protracted war with Sparta. They wanted a stable government, the traditional state religion, political harmony, and a quiet citizenry. But Socrates kept challenging the status quo, fighting complacency and fomenting discord rather than allowing peace.

As a result, a plot was hatched against him, and Socrates was charged with crimes of "corrupting the youth and believing in strange gods." He was subsequently brought to trial, where he defended himself with philosophic arguments, but he was ultimately convicted of being a harmful influence on the society. The Platonic dialogue, the *Apology*, presents the account of that trial, and it seems a faithful record of what Socrates said in his defense. In this context, "apology" does not mean contrition, but a justification for one's life.

In addition to the formal charges against him, several informal ones were also raised during the trial, such as "making the worse appear the better cause," which amounted to a charge of sophistry, and "believing in things above and below the earth." As to sophistry, that was clearly false, since Socrates had not used his rationality to seek the appearance of truth and he had not charged for his teaching. The other accusation referred to speculation about metaphysics, the study of reality, but Socrates had abandoned that pursuit when he was very young; most of his life was devoted to moral matters.

The Greeks were sometimes opposed to the study of metaphysics because they believed some knowledge was forbidden, that sacred ground should not be violated by one's desire to know. Christianity has a similar notion, as seen in Genesis: Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden for eating of the tree of knowledge. The underlying theme is that certain things are prohibited to humankind, and to seek understanding beyond one's realm is to commit the sin of hubris, excessive pride.

The Apology

In trying to refute the formal charges, Socrates faced three accusers, Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon, and he was able to challenge Meletus directly in the courtroom. Apparently, these men were fronting for more powerful interests—members of the establishment who wanted to rid the state of dissenters.

He began by questioning Meletus with regard to the charge of being "a villainous misleader of youth," first begging the indulgence of the court for proceeding in his usual manner:

> Come hither, Meletus, and let me ask a question of you. You think a great deal about the improvement of youth?
>
> Yes, I do.
>
> Tell the judges, then, who is their improver; for you must know, as you have taken pains to discover their corrupter, and are citing and accusing me before them. Speak, then, and tell the judges who their improver is . . . [t]he laws. But that, my good sir, is not my meaning. I want to know who the person is, who in the first place, knows the laws.
>
> The judges, Socrates, who are present in court.
>
> What do you mean to say, Meletus, that they are able to instruct and improve youth?
>
> Certainly they are.
>
> What, all of them, or only some and not others?
>
> All of them.
>
> By the goddess Hera, that is good news! There are plenty of improvers, then. And what do you say of the audience—do they improve them?
>
> Yes, they do.
>
> And the Senators?
>
> Yes, the Senators improve them.
>
> But perhaps the ecclesiasts corrupt them?—or do they too improve them?
>
> They improve them.
>
> Then every Athenian improves and elevates them; all with the exception of myself; and I alone am their corrupter? Is that what you affirm?
>
> That is what I stoutly affirm.
>
> I am very unfortunate if that is true. . . .

In trying to flatter the court, Meletus has placed himself in an impossible position, and his claim is reduced to an *argumentum ad absurdum*; surely Socrates cannot be the only person in Athens who harms the youth. Socrates then uses a comparison with horse training to weaken the case further. He points out that, with regard to horse training, only a few specialists will improve horses, while most will do them harm. In the same way, the few will improve the youth, and most will harm them—just the opposite of Meletus's claim. In this way Socrates discredits Meletus's authority, showing that he has not thought very deeply about such matters.

But Socrates then poses another question:

> Which is better, to live among bad citizens, or among good ones? . . . Do not the good do their neighbors good, and the bad do them evil?

> Certainly.
>
> And is there anyone who would rather be injured than benefited by those who live with him? Answer, my good friend; the law requires you to answer—does anyone like to be injured?
>
> Certainly not.
>
> And when you accuse me of corrupting and deteriorating the youth, do you allege that I corrupt them intentionally or unintentionally?
>
> Intentionally, I say.
>
> But you have just admitted that the good do their neighbors good, and the evil do them evil . . . (so) if a man with whom I have to live is corrupted by me, I am very likely to be harmed by him, and intentionally too? [T]hat is what you are saying, and of that you will never persuade me or any other human being.

In other words, Socrates would never intentionally corrupt people, because, by definition, bad people harm their neighbors, including Socrates himself. He would not want to be harmed; therefore he would never corrupt anyone.

Of course, that means no one would ever harm another intentionally, which is a questionable position. Nevertheless, Socrates believed it to be true. He maintained that if we knew what was good for us, and for the city-state as a whole, we would never hurt other people. We do harm only out of ignorance, not realizing that it will rebound against us. Once we understand where our interest lies, we will do unto others as we would have them do unto us; that will ensure that we will be treated the same way. We should help others, not for their sake, but for our sake.

This is the meaning of the Platonic dictum "Virtue is knowledge." Once we know what is good, we will behave in accordance with the good. In other words, knowledge guarantees virtuous conduct, which means the Socratic mission has even greater implications than it seems originally. Socrates is trying to make his society more aware and, by doing so, more moral.

As for the charge of believing in strange gods, Socrates maneuvers Meletus into claiming that he does not believe in any gods. In order to make him look as bad as possible, Meletus declares Socrates to be a complete atheist. That enables Socrates to spring a trap:

> Did ever any man believe in horsemanship, and not in horses? Or in flute playing and not in flute-players? No, my friend; I will answer to you and to the court, as you refuse to answer for yourself. There is no man who ever did. But now please to answer the next question: can a man believe in spiritual and divine agencies, and not in spirits and demigods?
>
> He cannot.

> Nevertheless you swear in the indictment that I believe in divine or spiritual agencies . . . (so) I must believe in spirits.

Socrates is referring to the well-known fact that he hears a divine voice, which means that he must believe in divinities. Receiving spiritual messages might indicate a belief in strange gods, but not the rejection of all gods.

Despite these arguments, the jury of 501 Athenians finds him guilty, although by a surprising margin of only sixty votes, and Meletus calls for the death penalty. As was customary, Socrates was then asked to suggest a fine for himself as an alternative. His response was as follows:

> And what shall I propose on my part, O men of Athens? Clearly that which is my due. And what is that which I ought to pay or receive? What shall be done to the man who has never had the wit to be idle during his whole life; but has been careless of what the many care about—wealth and family interests, and military offices, and speaking in the assembly, and magistracies, and plots, and parties. Reflecting that I was really too honest a man to follow in this way and live, I did not go where I could do no good to you or to myself; but where I could do the greatest good privately to everyone of you, thither I went, and sought to persuade every man among you that he must look to himself, and seek virtue and wisdom before he looks to his private interests. . . . What would be a reward suitable to a poor man who is your benefactor, who desires leisure that he may instruct you? There can be no more fitting reward than maintenance in the Prytaneum. . . .

This speech, proposing that he should be maintained at state expense in a public residence, did not endear Socrates to the members of the court. At the urging of his friends he proposed a small fine, but in the end the jury voted for the death penalty.

The arguments that Socrates offered at his trial are illustrative of his philosophic method, but they are hardly the best defense he could have mounted. For example, the analogy with horses may not be applicable to educating the young. When it comes to raising children, most people do it quite well; experts are not needed, because it is a general ability, not a specialized skill.

At age seventy, perhaps he was ready to die, or maybe he knew he would be condemned no matter how he defended himself. If he lost the arguments, he would be convicted, and if he won, that showed what a dangerously clever man he was, and he would be convicted. For whatever reason, he did not try very hard to acquit himself. In a sense, he was put to death not for what he did, but for what he was, and that could not be changed. He was also put to death for not groveling, for not bringing his family before the court to elicit sympathy:

> You think that I was convicted through deficiency of words—I mean, that if I had thought fit to leave nothing undone, nothing unsaid, I might have gained an acquittal. Not so; the deficiency that led to my conviction was not of words—certainly not. But I had not the boldness or impudence or inclination to address you as you would have liked me to address you, weeping and wailing and lamenting, and saying and doing many things which you have been accustomed to hear from others, and which, as I say, are unworthy of me. But I thought that I ought not to do anything common or mean in the hour of danger: nor do I now repent of the manner of my defense, and I would rather die having spoken after my manner, than speak in your manner and live. . . . The difficulty, my friends, is not in avoiding death but in avoiding unrighteousness.

At the end of the *Apology*, Socrates makes a final statement, referring to his sons and, more generally, to the importance of philosophic reflection over wealth, fame, or power.

> When my sons are grown up, I would ask you, O my friends, to . . . trouble them, as I have troubled you, if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue; or if they pretend to be something when they are really nothing—then reprove them, as I have reproved you, for not caring about that for which they ought to care. . . . And if you do this, I and my sons will have received justice at your hands.
>
> The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die and you to live. Which is better, God only knows.

Two months later Socrates was put to death. In the account of the *Crito* he is offered a chance to escape, but he argues that it would be wrong to disobey the state, even when the law is unjust. As reported in the *Phaedo*, his final hours were spent with friends, discoursing calmly about immortality. At the very end he said, "I owe a cock to Asclepius, see that it is paid." He might have remembered a debt to a friend, or maybe he was referring to Asclepius, the god of healing; perhaps he thought he had been cured of the disease of life.

On the political level, the execution of Socrates makes us wonder how much criticism a state can tolerate before it acts to safeguard its welfare. In other words, to what extent should government limit the opposition of people like Socrates in order to function in a stable way? In a liberal democracy we support civil liberties, such as free speech, although we do impose limitations for the public good. We will prosecute slander and libel, hate speech and incendiary speech that cause a riot, but in general we assume that a free society is fundamentally strong and can withstand verbal attacks. In ridding itself of Socrates, the Athenian city-state revealed its own weakness, as well as betraying the democratic ideals expressed by Pericles. Only the unhealthy horse is bothered by the gadfly.

As for Socrates, he remained faithful to rational inquiry, which is the hallmark of philosophy, even at the cost of his life. Integrity and courage in the pursuit of truth seems to be his legacy.