A Legacy of Ancient Greece: Western Philosophy

**philosophy:** *(n.)* the use of reason and argument in seeking truth and knowledge of reality, especially of the causes and nature of things and of the principles governing existence…; a personal rule of life.

**Introduction:**

The root for the word “philosophy” is made up of two Greek words: *philo*, meaning “love,” and *sophos*, meaning “wisdom.” Put together, we have φιλοσοφία *(philosophia)*, which literally translates to "love of wisdom." For thousands of years, philosophers have been wrestling with fundamental questions: What is most real — the physical world or the realm of mind and spirit? What is a just society? What is right vs. what is wrong?

**Types of Philosophy:**

There are several branches of philosophy. Some focus on “what is.” Others focus on “what ought to be.” In this second group of disciplines – which includes ethics, political philosophy, and aesthetics – philosophers grapple with the issue of what we should value in life:

- **Ethics** is the study of what is “good” or “bad” in human behavior, thoughts, and feelings. It asks, What is of value? and How should we treat each other? It is associated with the idea of morality.
- **Political philosophy** is the study of government and the relationship of individuals and communities to the state. It includes questions about justice, the common good, law, property, and the rights and obligations of the citizen. It asks How should societies be governed?
- **Aesthetics** deals with beauty, art, enjoyment, perception, and matters of taste and sentiment. It asks, What is beauty? Is beauty solely in the eyes of the beholder? Or are some objects, people, and works (music, art, literature) objectively more beautiful than others?

**Socrates, Plato and Aristotle:**

To understand Western philosophy, we must look to its birthplace: ancient Greece. Specifically, we must begin with a trio of philosopher-teachers: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Together they laid the foundation for most of Western philosophy. It is likely that you are familiar with at least their names. Let’s review their lasting contributions to the world of philosophy.

Philosophy began as dialogue. And it was **Socrates** *(469–399 B.C.E.)* that made dialogue famous. He wrote nothing down, but quizzed his contemporaries in the marketplace on topics they felt most certain about – and showed them that their certainty was misplaced.

Socrates was a teacher without a school. He walked about Athens, engaging people in provocative dialogue, peppering them with questions. His goal was to help those he questioned
find the truth. He described himself as a “midwife” and “gadfly.” Today we call his approach the Socratic method. By repeatedly questioning, disproving, and testing the thoughts of his pupils on such questions as the nature of “love” or “good,” he helped his students reach deeper, clearer ideas.

The Socratic method did not just promote learning; it also challenged the conventional ideas and traditions of his time. Socrates offended many powerful people and was eventually charged with corrupting the youth of Athens. Even in this, Socrates provides a lesson for us today: challenges to the norm may lead to community opposition and sanctions [punishments]. (Luckily, sanctions today are less severe than in the time of Socrates; he was condemned to death by an Athenian jury for disrespecting the gods.)

Socrates did not write a word. We know much about him and his teachings through the writings of his student Plato (427–347 B.C.E.). Plato’s most famous works were dialogues, conversations between two or more people that present and critique various viewpoints.

Plato’s dialogues feature Socrates questioning and challenging others and presenting his own philosophy. After Socrates was put to death, Plato became disillusioned with Athenian democracy and left the city for many years. He eventually returned to Athens and founded The Academy, considered by some to be the precursor to the world’s first university.

In Plato’s philosophy, the human soul has three parts: intellect, spirit, and appetite (which is described as basic animal desires). Plato believed that these parts interact to determine human behavior. Plato urged that the intellect, the highest faculty, be trained to control the other two. In his book The Republic, Plato revealed his political philosophy; there he envisioned that the best government would be one of a class of philosopher-kings that would rule over the warriors and the common people.

Just as Plato studied under Socrates, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) studied under Plato. Aristotle entered Plato’s Academy at age 18 and stayed for 20 years. In 342 B.C.E., Aristotle went to northern Greece where, for several years, he tutored a young boy named Alexander, later known as Alexander the Great. After educating Alexander, Aristotle returned to Athens to set up his own school, the Lyceum, adjacent to Plato’s Academy. There, one could obtain instruction in all branches of knowledge: politics, ethics, biology, literature, etc. Today’s university system is modeled after Aristotle’s Lyceum.

The depth and breadth of Aristotle’s ideas were unsurpassed in ancient Western civilization. In addition to tackling philosophical questions, Aristotle wrote influential works on biology, physics, astronomy, mathematics, psychology, and literary criticism. Aristotle placed more importance on the physical world than did Plato.

Aristotle also won renown for his ethical and political theories. He wrote that the highest good for people is a virtuous life, fully governed by the faculty of reason. Aristotle promoted the doctrine of the Golden Mean, or the notion that virtue lies in a middle ground between two extremes. Courage, for example, is a virtue. If one has an excess of courage, the person would be considered reckless. If one has too little courage, he would be deemed a coward.

Many of the ideas first formulated by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle have long been integrated into Western culture and education. As you go about your daily routine, see if you notice the influence on your life of these three great philosophers of ancient Greece.