

Chapter 1

PHILOSOPHY BEGINS

It was in ancient Greece that man first found the path to philosophic wisdom. From that beginning have come the philosophies of the Western world.

I. THE PRE-SOCRATIC PERIOD

From the first, Greek philosophy developed separately, on the whole, from the current religion. It started from observation of the world, striving to explain the nature of things - particularly, at first, the physical universe.

The Milesian School. According to Aristotle, the first philosopher was Thales of Miletus, one of the Seven Sages. Little is known of his life. He lived in the sixth century B.C.; had travelled in Egypt; became famous as an engineer and inventor, for his astronomical observations and as a statesman. Later writers exaggerated his knowledge, assuming that he possessed all the theory implied by his practical observations.

Aristotle says he thought water was the material cause of all things. And here we meet a question which occupied all the Greek philosophers, and has been debated ever since. The problem is this: things undergo change. Food is eaten and becomes flesh; a tree is burnt and becomes ashes; among lifeless things one substance is transmuted into another. But how is this possible? It is not a case of one complete thing being replaced by another, a tree being removed and a heap of ashes placed there instead. It is a real change of one into another, a transformation. But doesn't this require some underlying subject of change, something that will link the previous reality with the new one, the tree with the ashes? Otherwise we are not positing an inner change, but the total replacement of one thing by a completely different one.

Thales and others thought that what was required was one of the familiar elements, which would be the permanent base for all changes, and the element from which all things are made.

Anaximander, an associate of Thales, posited "the boundless" as the foundation of things, teaching that the elements we know - water, fire, etc. - arise from this. By the boundless he probably meant the indeterminate, arguing that what can be all things must according to itself be quite indeterminate - if it were already something determinate, how could it become something else without losing itself?

An associate of Anaximander named Anaximenes gave a more elaborate explanation of nature than his predecessors had done. According to him, air is the underlying reality. The process of becoming is explained, ingeniously, through rarefaction and condensation. By rarefaction air becomes fire; by condensation it becomes, progressively as it is more condensed, wind, cloud, water, earth, stone. He applied his theory consistently, explaining the cosmos by means of it: the earth arose from air; the heavenly bodies, which are fiery, arose from moisture from the earth, which became rarefied; the human soul is air, and thus holds us together.

The Milesian school - Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes - set the Greek intellect on the path to be followed in succeeding centuries. Their approach and teachings may seem crude to us.

But if it were not for them, our civilization might never have existed. In striving to learn the nature of things, and to do so by observation and thought applied to uncovering the basic causes, the most universal and comprehensive explanations, they initiated the scientific spirit. They stimulated others by their ideas: not only in cosmology, but also in politics and in regard to practical inventions.

Pythagoras. Untold influence on later thought was exercised by Pythagoras of Samos (sixth century B.C.), who founded a religious fraternity at Kroton in Southern Italy which became the chief scientific school of the Greek world. Because he left no writings, his teachings are uncertain, but he is diversely represented as a religious teacher, as a man of science, and as a statesman and reformer. Apparently he taught reincarnation and the kinship of men and beasts. He regarded philosophy as a purification which will release man from the "wheel of birth": that is, his soul, ennobled by philosophic contemplation, will no longer need to be united with a body, but will lead a separate existence. He helped found the science of mathematics, and emphasised the mathematical harmony of things - proportion and harmony in music, for example. His tendency to explain reality in mathematical terms, to reduce physical things to mathematics, was to have a marked influence on Plato and others. It is a tendency found in much modern thought.

Heraclitus and Parmenides. In the fifth century there arose two opposite explanations of the world, one proposed by Heraclitus of Ephesus, the other by Parmenides of Elea, in Southern Italy.

Heraclitus was fascinated by the fact of change. Wherever we look we find things undergoing movement or change; this constant process is ceaselessly altering things. Heraclitus illustrated it by a flowing stream: "You cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you."¹

By the time you have stepped into the river, it is no longer the river you started to step into, because *that* water has moved downstream, to be replaced by completely different water. He says in another place: "We step and do not step into the same river; we are and are not."² He means by this that a thing which is ever altering lacks any permanent identity: it both is and is not – it is not what it was an instant before. Nothing in our experience is being (in the sense of something stable); everything changes continually. These changes, in his opinion, are not merely superficial, leaving a stable core; they are utterly radical, leaving nothing the same.

Reacting against the teaching of Heraclitus, Parmenides went to the other extreme. He taught that reality is so permanent that it is not subject to any change at all. He argued that being either is or is not: there is no room for anything in between. Now, if something is not (is non-existent) it doesn't explain or affect anything. But if something *is*, it is not in a state of becoming. To say a thing is changing is to imply that it both is and is not – that it is non-identical with itself, for it is becoming something else. But it is contradictory to say that a thing both is and is not itself.

Parmenides took as his first principle: it is. By "it" he meant being or reality. Then he drew the conclusions that seemed to follow from his principle. What *is* must be one. From whence would diversity come to it? Not from nothingness, since nothingness is not the cause of anything. So *what is* has utter unity. Apart from what is there is nothing, so there is no source from which anything could be added to it. Therefore it is complete. It did not begin to exist, for to do so it would have had to arise from nothingness. It cannot be deprived of anything, for there is nothing outside to attack it. It cannot change in any way. In short, reality is uncreated, indestructible, complete, indivisible, irremovable. He regarded it as corporeal: he speaks of it as a sphere; and Aristotle tells us Parmenides believed only in a sensible reality.³

The source of the opposite positions of Heraclitus and Parmenides lies in their starting points. In a true understanding of reality, it is necessary to reconcile being with becoming, unity with plurality, the principles of reason with the testimony of the senses.

¹ Frags. 41, 42.

² Frag. 81.

³ Arist., *De Caelo*, 298b 21.

The method of Parmenides concentrates on being, unity, the principles of reason. If his solution does not square with sense experience, so much the worse for the senses. As he himself says: "All these are but names given by mortals who believe them to be true: coming into being and passing away, being and non-being, change of place and alteration of bright colour."¹ Heraclitus accepts what the senses reveal, a world of change and multiplicity. But if change went as deep as he supposes, being, unity and rational principles would be destroyed. However, it should be added that Heraclitus certainly did not see the full implications of his theory.

Empedocles. A citizen of Akragas in Sicily, Empedocles is famed for many things besides philosophy. He probably had early associations with the Pythagoreans, and their influence appears in his religious teachings, which are hardly compatible with his philosophy. He believed in reincarnation and kinship with the lower animals. He also claimed to be a god. He was a democratic politician. Aristotle ascribes to him the invention of rhetoric. According to Galen he was the founder of the very influential Italian school of medicine.

In philosophy, he started from the principle of Parmenides: what is, *is*. But he understood it in his own way. He wished to account for the obvious fact of change. Now, change cannot be accepted if all being is one in the Parmenidean sense. So Empedocles taught that there are four substances, each indivisible and immutable like the Parmenidean *one*, except that they undergo movement from place to place. They are earth, air, fire and water, the four elements which were regarded, for many centuries, as the basis of all bodies, although not with the immutable substantial character Empedocles gave them. He taught that these four alone are real natures or substances, that all the other things we call substances are combinations of these. A tree, for example, has not a real nature of its own, but is just a collection of primary elements united in a certain way. Combinations and dissolutions of these elements are brought about by love and strife – or attraction and repulsion, as we might say. The world's present state is accounted for by evolution: creatures arose in a variety of combinations – he speaks of "offspring of oxen with the faces of men, while others arose as offspring of men with the heads of oxen"² - and those combinations survived which were fitted to do so.

Anaxagoras. Born c. 500 B.C., Anaxagoras lived first in Clazomenae in Asia Minor, then in Athens – from which he was exiled – finally in Lampsacus, a colony of Miletus. He had probably studied in the Milesian school; he was a teacher of Pericles. He held that all corporeal things contain all others. The meaning of this, apparently, is that each thing contains tiny portions of all the others: that each piece of bread we eat, for example, contains tiny portions of blood, flesh, bone, etc. His reason for holding this extraordinary view was his acceptance of Parmenides' thesis that being neither comes into, nor passes out of, existence. Yet Anaxagoras wanted to admit change. So he reasoned that the world is made up of innumerable basic elements which never change into anything else, but which combine in different proportions. And we name different "substances" from the elements that predominate in them.

Anaxagoras went beyond the other early philosophers in maintaining that an intelligent cause is necessary to account for the universe. He speaks of this as *Nous* (Mind), and says *Nous* has knowledge of everything, power over all, moves all and orders all.

Leucippus of Miletus. The difficulties inherent in these various theories of the nature of bodies helped to originate philosophical atomism. Leucippus seems to have been the real originator of this theory. He taught the existence of innumerable and ever-

1 Frag. 8.

2 Frag. 61.

moving elements, the atoms, moving in the void, which also has real existence. He probably taught that all atoms are alike in kind and that differences in things must therefore be accounted for by the shape, size and arrangement of atoms.

2. SOCRATES

By the time of Socrates (469 – 399 B.C.) thought had reached an impasse. There were conflicting theories in cosmology, psychology, ethics, politics. In the previous section we have sketched the various explanations of matter. None was satisfactory; each explained some aspects of things by neglecting other aspects. Conflicting explanations of the human soul were proposed: it was thought of as composed of air or of the four elements; or else it was thought to be a subsistent something that would survive bodily death. In ethics, some regarded social convention as the guide, while others despised such popular morality. In politics, everything from democracy to tyranny was advocated.

Politically, it was a turbulent and exciting period into which Socrates came, the age of Pericles and of the expansion of Athens. In literature, it was the golden age that begot Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

Philosophic thought was at a stage where it could either degenerate or make a new thrust upwards. Socrates was to prepare the way for that new thrust, and in this lies his immense importance for later Greek thought and indirectly for all later thought.

He left no writings, so what we know of his life and teachings comes from others, particularly Plato. The writings of Plato are mainly in the form of dialogues with Socrates as the chief speaker; and it is difficult to know how far the teachings given are those of the historical Socrates and how far they are original to Plato, and merely put in the mouth of Socrates. A judicious comparison of Plato's accounts with those of others, especially Xenophon – who was a disciple of Socrates – and Aristotle, can bring us nearer the real Socrates, but haziness still remains.

In his early life Socrates was engrossed in cosmological speculation, hoping to learn the truth of things from that source. But he was disappointed there, for the explanations offered seemed too superficial, and he became convinced one had to go deeper to uncover the ultimate truths. It was always ultimates Socrates sought, especially in the moral order. What is knowledge? What is virtue? What are prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, and how are they related? What is goodness? What is beauty?

In the *Symposium*, Plato represents Socrates as recalling what he was taught, as a young man in search of wisdom, by a certain priestess, Diotima of Mantinea. Whether historical or not, the account illustrates the truth that the whole activity of Socrates is dominated and illuminated by his devotion to supreme goodness and beauty. Diotima says to him: "But if it were given to man to gaze on beauty's very self – unsullied, unalloyed, and freed from the mortal taint that haunts the frailer loveliness of flesh and blood – if, I say, it were given to man to see the heavenly beauty face to face, would you call *his* an unenviable life, whose eyes had been opened to the vision, and who had gazed upon it in true contemplation until it had become his own forever?"¹

The attraction of this vision inspired Socrates as he pursued his chosen mission: to seek wisdom and goodness, and lead others to do the same. He used to spend his days in the streets and gymnasias of Athens, talking to anyone who would listen to him, disputing questions of philosophy. Always his aim was to reach the essences or natures of things, and express these in precise definitions. He detested glib explanations and shallow thinking – and there were plenty of these, for they were practised by the professional Sophists. The Sophists responded to the need for higher

1 211e – 212a.

education felt by many rich young men. They offered, for a price, an all-round education in everything worth knowing. They would teach politics and ethics, science, grammar, rhetoric. Some, such as Protagoras, were at least well-intentioned; others were not. Socrates objected to them because they claimed knowledge is easily attained, whereas he knew its attainment to be an arduous task; because they dispensed superficial cleverness, not deep wisdom; because they pandered to popular beliefs, instead of proclaiming unpopular truths; because they produced slick debaters, not honest dialecticians.

Socrates regarded himself as ignorant of most things, but as a seeker of wisdom. He developed a dialectical method that would aid him in his search and destroy the pretensions to knowledge of the Sophists and their disciples. It worked like this. Socrates would propose a question, such as, What is justice? His interlocutor would give some quick and superficial answer. Socrates would follow up with further questions, all designed to reveal the inadequacy of the other's answers.

Finally the opponent would be reduced to utter confusion, finding he knew nothing of the subject he had thought he knew quite well. The questions would continue, but now with the object of leading the other to a true understanding. Socrates did not believe in doing anyone's thinking for them, but in helping them to do their own.

He had an ardent following, principally of young men. While his method could have the great advantage of leading them to think realistically, it sometimes had unfortunate results. It could easily lead a youth to rebel against the status quo without being able to suggest anything to replace it; it could breed sceptics and rebels. This was far from the intention of Socrates, who faithfully observed the laws, had a great love for Athens and was a man of admirable moral integrity. But he was always in search of truth, not in possession of it; and his questionings and difficulties and doubts had a bad effect on some of his disciples. This was one reason why he was regarded as a menace to Athenian society. Another was political enmity engendered by his unsparing opposition to the hypocrisy and double-dealing of current politics.

In the year 399 he was brought to trial on two charges: impiety and corruption of the minds of youth. He denied the charges, but was condemned to death. The *Phaedo* of Plato gives a magnificent account of his last day. His friends were allowed to spend the day with him in his prison cell, and he followed the pattern established over the years: he discussed philosophy.

He talked about the duty of obedience to the laws; about the superiority of the soul to the body; about the goodness of philosophic contemplation; about the immortality of the soul. As sunset drew near and it was nearly time for him to die, Plato quotes him as saying: "To feel confident about the fate of his soul is the right of any man who during life has turned his back upon the pleasures and adornments of the body, looking upon them as alien to him and more likely to do him harm than good; who has been anxious to enjoy the delights of learning; and who, after adorning his soul with no alien trinkets but with the true ornaments of self-restraint, justice, courage, freedom and truth, awaits his departure to the other world, ready to march whenever fate may call."¹

The prison officer prepared the hemlock, and Socrates calmly drank it. He walked up and down the cell until his legs became heavy; and he said a few last words to his friends. Then he lay on his bed, while a spreading numbness neared his heart. He gave a convulsive movement, and his friends saw that he was dead.

1 *Phaedo*, 114e – 115a.

3. PLATO

Plato (427 – 347 B.C.) was born into one of the most distinguished families of Athens. They closely participated in the politics of the time, and he believed his vocation to be a political one. But as he saw practical politics in action, whether oligarchy or democracy, he rapidly became disillusioned. His disillusionment was completed by the unjust condemnation of Socrates, his friend and guide. He says: "The result was that I, at first full of zeal for a public career, when I saw all this happening and everything going to pieces, fell at last into bewilderment."¹

He resolved to clarify his own ideas and to continue the work of Socrates. So he began his famous dialogues, expounding and developing the amazingly fruitful, but incomplete and exploratory, concepts of the old philosopher. When he was about forty years old, he established his Academy, named from the grove of the hero Academus in the garden where it was built. The Academy was really the world's first university, and it lasted nearly a thousand years, until closed by the Emperor Justinian in A.D. 529. Mathematics, physical science and philosophy – especially moral and political philosophy – were taught. Lectures were given to which the public were admitted, but the teaching method for the regular students was an adaptation of the conversational method of Socrates.

Plato did not work out a complete system of philosophy, nor did he put his deepest thoughts into writing.² His dialogues were intended for the educated public as well as for philosophers; and the deepest and most technical considerations were mainly reserved for the students at the Academy. Nevertheless, we can form a fairly clear idea of his philosophy from the writings. Fortunately, they seem to have come down to us complete: Plato is the one voluminous author of classical antiquity of whom this can be said.³ Plato was a great literary artist as well as a thinker, and his dialogues have been read as literature down to the present day. His dramatic genius adds a warmth, vividness and persuasiveness to the expositions of his teachings, but at times leaves him open to misunderstanding and to being taken more literally than he intended.

The Ideas. Fundamental to his philosophy is his doctrine of ideas. He saw that thought far transcends the corporeal things of our sensible experience. We see things that are to some extent beautiful or good, we compare things that are approximately equal. But what of absolute beauty or goodness, what of absolute equality? Do these exist? Suppose I see two pieces of wood of about equal length. They will not be *exactly* equal, yet from them I somehow derive the idea of absolute equality. Everything we experience is a deficient partaker of the absolute ideas we derive from it: it may be somewhat beautiful or good, and so on with other perfections, but it always falls short of the standard.

These absolutes are greater than the physical things of sense experience. Beauty, according to itself, is uniform and complete, admitting of no alteration; if the very essence of beauty were altered, it would become something else, just as, if a side were removed from the triangle, it would become another figure. Similarly, absolute equality admits of no deviation – it admits nothing of the unequal.⁴

We never experience absolutes in this world. Are we to conclude that they are nothing but mental fictions – that they have no reality outside our own minds? Plato would not allow this. On the contrary, absolutes are more real than the deficient imitations of them revealed by our sense-experience. They do not exist in the world of

1 *Ep.* VII, 325e.

2 Cf. *Ep.* VII, 343a.

3 Cf. A. E. Taylor, *Plato, the Man and His Work*, ch. 2, sec. 1.

4 Cf. *Phaedo*, 74 – 77.

sense, but they certainly exist elsewhere; and they deserve to be called reality far more than do the fleeting objects of sense.

So Plato conceives the physical world as an inferior likeness of an immeasurably more magnificent reality, a reality we cannot sense, but of which we can gain some understanding by philosophic contemplation. He uses the terms ideas or forms to signify true being such as equality, beauty, truth. In reading his dialogues we must not equate idea (or form) with a mere concept in a man's mind. It means a supra-sensible reality. The exact meaning of the theory of forms was never set down in writing by Plato, and scholars give differing interpretations. Obscurities probably remained in his own mind about it. But it would be very naive on our part to imagine him teaching the existence of another world, which would be a replica (except spiritual and perfect) of the world we live in, and existing in some heavenly space. The forms are intelligible and immaterial, and consequently not localized in a place. Plato speaks pictorially of them in his myths, but even there he says that the real existence seen by the separated soul is "colourless, without shape and intangible, visible only to the intelligence which sits at the helm of the soul."¹

How do we understand absolutes when we experience only deficient imitations of them? These imitations are not a proportionate cause of the ideas in our intellect. In other words, if I see two pieces of wood *approximately* equal, that sight, of itself, does not convey to me absolute equality. Plato concluded that these deficient imitations are but reminders of the forms or ideas. Even if a thing only vaguely resembles something else, it may remind us of that other thing. It is the same, he thought, with all physical things in relation to intelligible reality: they remind us. An experiment to establish this conclusion is conducted in the *Meno*. Socrates asks geometrical questions of a boy slave who had learned no mathematics. Drawing figures and asking appropriate questions, he elicits from the boy the properties of these figures. He taught the boy nothing, he insists; he just put questions to him. But the boy had not previously learned mathematics in this life. Therefore he must have recalled knowledge he had prior to this life.²

So forms or ideas such as goodness, beauty, equality really exist, although not in this world. The human soul is an immaterial substance and existed before its union with the body. In that previous state it beheld the pure forms, the intelligible principles, and the memory of that vision lies dormant within it. The vision can to some extent be recovered through the process of recollection.³

The Soul. "A soul using a body"⁴ is a definition of man given in the Academy shortly after Plato's time, and it expresses his teaching. Seeing the soul as immensely superior to the body, he thought of the human body as a hindrance rather than a help in leading a noble and happy life. The soul's superiority is seen by various considerations: it can exist independently of the body, and originally did so; it is true being, while the body belongs to the shadowy world of becoming; it is incorruptible and everlasting, while the body is corruptible and temporal; it tends to the contemplation of reality, but the body drags it down to sensible appearances.⁵ Although he stresses this aspect, in other passages he acknowledges the help the body can give the soul; in fact, he insists on a balanced development of body and soul.⁶

Being and Becoming. Plato wanted a middle way between the extremes taught by Heraclitus and Parmenides. Heraclitus had said the whole world is continually and

1 *Phaedrus*, 247c.

2 *Meno*, 86; cf. *Phaedo*, 74, 75.

3 Cf. *Phaedrus*, 250.

4 *Alcibiades I*, 130c.

5 Cf. *Phaedo*, 80, 81.

6 Cf. *Republic*, 410 - 412.

radically changing. This Plato rejected. Such a concept was intellectually repugnant. Parmenides had taught the existence of one immutable being. This also was unacceptable, for it reduced to illusion the changeable things of sense. Either teaching was quite unlivable. Plato reasoned that "what is" must be divided into two spheres, a spiritual world and a material. That which is, without diminution of the meaning of *is*, must be pure, independent, unchangeable. To the degree that a thing has some impurity mingled with it, to that degree it falls short of what *is* means. It is, yet it is not. The things of which "it is" can be said without qualification are true being, reality without qualification.¹ But this cannot be said of anything corporeal, for the corporeal is a mingling of opposites, undergoing continuous changes. So "it is" can be said of a body only with qualification, and a body is becoming rather than being.

Since sensible things are in a state of becoming, and that which becomes requires some cause, there is a cause or maker of the things we experience. After saying it would be hard to discover the maker of the universe and impossible to declare him to all men, he goes on to speak of a Demiurge as fashioning the world. It is disputed whether he means God, or the Divine Reason, or a lesser being than God. The Demiurge looked to the eternal for an exemplar of the world, and made it in the likeness of this.²

An ingenious theory is put forward concerning the structure of bodies.³ Plato accepts earth, air, fire and water as the primary elements of which all bodies are composed. He posits that each of these elements has a geometrical shape, assigning a figure according to the supposed properties of the body: earth is given a cubical shape because it is the most immobile and stable; fire is a pyramid because the pyramid has the sharpest cutting edges and the sharpest points in every direction. Each of the primary elements is so small individually that it is invisible, and only in combination are they seen. From such postulates he attempts to construct a system of physics and biology. The far-fetched nature of some of the conclusions is mitigated by his repeated insistence that these matters are too obscure for us to have certain knowledge of them, and we must be content with the likeliest hypothesis. His construction is interesting as showing an excessively mathematico-deductive approach to the understanding of physical reality.

The Purpose of Life. Plato vigorously combats doctrines that place the highest end in power or pleasure. Man's chief task in life is the "tendance of his soul". His life, harmonised by the moral virtues, must ascend to the contemplation of the highest things.

No one is voluntarily bad.⁴ Badness is due either to a faulty bodily condition or to unenlightened upbringing, and these overtake a man against his will. But he must do his best by education to escape badness and become good. This doctrine implicitly denies free will, a denial Plato did not intend.

Plato makes "the Good" - or Beauty - supreme. His deepest thoughts on the Good were never committed to writing. But in the *Republic* he says this of it: "It is the cause of knowledge and truth; and so, while you may think of it as an object of knowledge, you will do well to regard it as something beyond truth and knowledge and, precious as both these are, of still higher worth."⁵ And just as the sun gives existence, growth and nourishment to visible things, the objects of knowledge derive from the Good their very reality.

1 Cf. *ibid.*, 478 – 480.

2 *Timaeus*, 28, 29.

3 *Ibid.*, 55d – 56c.

4 *Ibid.*, 86e – 87b.

5 508e.

By the Good, does Plato mean God? The above text would later be very suggestive for the Neo-Platonists, and then for Christian theologians and philosophers.

Society. The individual is not solitary, but is a part of society. As such, he must serve society, putting it before his private interests; by doing so, he will achieve his own highest interests. But the evil effects of a badly regulated society are enormous, and only a rare individual, towering above his fellows in moral stamina and intellectual brilliance, will be able to resist such contamination. No existing community even approaches what society should be: corruption, selfishness, stupidity, laziness prevail everywhere.

In the *Republic*, Plato gives his famous delineation of the perfect society. He returns to this subject in his final dialogue, the *Laws*, where he goes into much more detail, and makes many changes from the earlier work. Reading him, one sees the shining grandeur of his ideals, the honesty of his aspirations. But this contrasts severely with the methods of implementation and with many of the things he wanted implemented. He saw that the vast majority, left to themselves - rulers and ruled - would never exercise the self-discipline necessary for the perfect society to exist. So his legislation imposes discipline on them from without, in the hope that they will see the goodness of it and co-operate. This is particularly evident in the *Laws*, for there the rules are worked out in detail, and are imposed on the whole citizen body; whereas in the *Republic* Plato is mainly concerned with the governing class, maintaining that if they are good, they will ensure a good society.

While there is much that can be objected to in his legislation, there is also a great deal of wisdom; and the jurisprudence emanating from the Academy had a deep and lasting, although usually indirect, influence on Roman and later European law.

4. ARISTOTLE

Aristotle (384 - 322 B.C.) brought Greek philosophy to its apex. Born at Stagira in Thrace, he went to Athens as a youth, and enrolled in Plato's Academy at the age of seventeen. He spent twenty years at the Academy, until Plato's death. After that he left Athens, but returned about 335 B.C. to found his school, the Lyceum, which he conducted until shortly before he died. That twelve year period as head of the Lyceum was a time of almost unbelievable labour: he composed most of his extant writings, gave technical lectures to his students and more popular lectures to larger audiences, and did an enormous amount of research work in the natural sciences and in the analysis of political systems. The sheer mental activity involved in constructing his philosophy must have been immense.

His method was to set out the questions to be solved, ponder the answers given by his predecessors, then reason out the solution, endeavouring to incorporate in his own thinking the truths grasped or glimpsed by others, while avoiding their errors. A genius in logic - he is rightly ranked as the founder of logic - much of his work comprises careful classifications designed to expose all the facets of the subject under consideration.

Aristotle composed treatises on logic, the philosophy of nature, metaphysics, ethics, politics, poetics, rhetoric. With these works philosophy reached a maturity and definiteness towards which it had been growing since the first efforts of Thales. Of course there remained gaps and weaknesses as well as serious errors; but these were not such as to vitiate the whole system and demand its replacement by something better. Thomas Aquinas was to show, so many centuries later, how keen were the insights and how fertile the truths set forth by the supreme philosopher of antiquity.

Let us look briefly at Aristotle's teaching about causes, man, and God.

The Four Causes.¹ A cause, for Aristotle, is whatever immediately contributes to the existence of a thing. He distinguishes four ways in which this occurs. Firstly, something may contribute to an effect in the way a block of marble contributes to the being of a statue. The marble is that from which the statue is made – the raw material, so to speak. It belongs to the reality of the statue. Yet marble is not from itself a statue, but requires that something happen to it to make it one. Originally it is potentially a statue, not actually one. This is what Aristotle calls the material cause, or the matter. It is that from which something is. Secondly, there is what Aristotle calls the form; which is the specifying element of a thing – that which determines it to be this rather than that, e.g., a man rather than a horse. In the case of a statue, this is the shape: the statue is that of a man and not a horse because of the imitation of human shape the sculptor gave it. In natural things the form is the basic intrinsic principle fixing the thing to be of *this kind*, not that. Think of a number of natural things: water, gold, a pine tree, a mouse, a man. All are bodily, yet each is different from the others. Aristotle rejected the idea that the differences arise merely from the way the same primary elements are organized; he taught that each kind of thing - each substance - is basically and intrinsically determined in its species. A mouse and a man are not just two collections of the same elements. Certainly the same elements are had by each, but this pertains to the material cause, the stuff from which they are constituted.

There is more to them than that: there is a determining principle which accounts for one being a man and the other a mouse. This principle is called the form – or in living things, the soul. Plato's mistake was in separating the forms from matter, giving them a spiritual existence. Thirdly, the agent which produces a thing is called its cause, e.g., the sculptor who makes the statue. The producer is termed the efficient cause. Unlike the two previous causes the efficient cause is extrinsic to, or other than, the reality produced. This usage of the term corresponds to what in everyday speech is usually signified by the word cause. Fourthly, the end or aim towards which the other causes are directed is a cause of the effect. The sculptor has some good in mind, some desire to be satisfied, in sculpting the statue: it may be the desire to produce a beautiful object, or desire for renown, or for money. Unless he had some compelling motive he would not act and the statue would not come into existence. Even in ordinary speech we sometimes refer to the purpose as a cause, as in saying: "Love of adventure caused him to climb the mountain."

Man. Aristotle applies his concepts of form and matter to man. Each bodily thing is a composite of form and matter. In the case of man, the life principle (or soul) is the form: it is what determines the matter to be that of a man, analogously to the way in which the shape is what determines the marble to be a statue of Pericles. Further, the statue is one thing: it is not marble plus shape, but shaped marble. And a man is not a body plus a soul; his soul actualizes its matter to constitute with it a single entity. To ask whether the soul and body are one "is as meaningless as to ask whether the wax and the shape given to it by the stamp are one, or generally, the matter of a thing and that of which it is the matter."²

The soul does not simply make the human body alive, nor does it simply make it a human body; it makes it a body, and it does this by being its form.³ Aristotle's position utterly rules out every concept of man which would posit him as two things - a soul and a body - joined in some kind of moral union.

Does this mean that the soul perishes with the dissolution of the body? Aristotle replies that it indubitably follows that, insofar as the soul is the actuality of

1 Cf. *Physics*, bk. II, ch. 3; *Metaphysics*, bk. V, ch. 2.

2 *De Anima*, bk. II, ch. I, 412b, 5 - 8.

3 412b, 10 - 413a, 3.

certain bodily parts, it is inseparable from those parts. Yet some parts of the soul "may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at all."¹ He had stated earlier in the same work, the *De Anima*, that the criterion of whether the soul is capable of separate existence is: does it do or receive anything in which the body has no share? If so, it can exist separately; otherwise it cannot.² Most of the activity exercised by living things is bound up with their matter. This is the case with the vegetative functions of nutrition, growth and generation; and also with sense perception and emotion.

But man's power of thought is different: that is, his power of knowing in an abstract and universal way, of understanding the meaning of things instead of merely seeing, touching, imagining, etc. Aristotle concludes, from a comparison of the sensitive and intellective faculties, that mind or the power of thinking is separable from the body.³ It seems to be capable of eternal existence in isolation from all other psychic powers.⁴

Here a very difficult problem arises, one complicated by Aristotle's distinction between a passive intellect and an active intellect. What is this mind which is capable of separate existence? Is it the mind of each individual? If so, Aristotle is teaching personal survival after death. Or is it an intelligence transcending the individual, but in which he shares? We cannot go into the question here, but can simply note that interpreters disagree about Aristotle's meaning.⁵

In what does man's true happiness consist? Aristotle replies that it is contemplative activity. This activity is the best because: (a) reason is the best thing in us; (b) the objects of reason are the best of knowable objects; (c) it is the most continuous activity; (d) it is most self-sufficient; (e) it is loved for its own sake.⁶ Man will live thus "insofar as something divine is present in him."⁷ We must not confine ourselves to mortal things, but try our hardest to live in accordance with the best thing in us, namely, reason. And living thus we shall be living in harmony with our truest self, for reason is the thing most proper to man.

Metaphysics. The supreme part of philosophy, according to Aristotle, is first philosophy, or wisdom. It later came to be called metaphysics. This science is wisdom *par excellence*, because it deals with the deepest principles and explanations of reality. It embraces all things, studying them from the standpoint of being or reality as such, not from the more limited standpoint proper to, say, physics or mathematics. In his *Metaphysics* Aristotle discusses, among other things, substance and accidents, act and potency, the supreme substance: God.

Arguing that there must be an unmoved mover to account for the changes found in the universe, he goes on to deduce conclusions about the nature of the Prime Mover.⁸ In God, precisely because he is the unmoved mover, there can be no alteration from one state to another. He is "a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this *is* God."⁹ Thought is the most divine thing we know, so it must be possessed by God. But what object is fit for his contemplation? Only himself. In human knowledge there is a duality: the man who thinks is one thing, the object he thinks about is another; and even when he thinks about

¹ 413a 6.

² 403a 10 – 15.

³ *De Anima*, bk. III, ch. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 413b 24 – 29.

⁵ Cf. Sir David Ross, *Aristotle*, ch. 5, final section.

⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. X, ch. 7.

⁷ 1177b, 27.

⁸ *Metaphysics*, bk. XII, ch. 6 and 7.

⁹ 1072b 28 – 29.

himself, the thought is not the thinker. But no duality exists in God. His thought is of himself, and is identical with himself.¹

Aristotle has been criticised for making God too remote from man – of seeing him as the Prime Mover enclosed in self-contemplation and oblivious of man and his needs. Even his causality, for Aristotle, seems to be only final causality – he causes by being desired, not by acting on the world. However, although Aristotle's view of God is faulty, it contains profound truths (as St. Thomas was to show), truths whose implications correct the faults in the Philosopher's explicit opinions.

Concluding Remarks. In 2½ centuries – from Thales to Aristotle – Greek philosophy grew from its beginnings to the end of its formative stage. At first it was almost one with physical science, but its distinctive character became more manifest as it developed. With Plato and Aristotle it learned to handle questions that transcend the physical world. The differences between the two men have often been stressed, usually with a decided preference being expressed for one or the other. Aristotle's style is judged by some to be cold and forbidding. This criticism is unfair; his style is clear and very apt for the deep, intricate discussions he undertakes. The criticism arises partly from comparing his style with Plato's; but few writers indeed could survive that comparison. Besides, Plato aimed his works at a much wider public, reserving the deepest points for his oral teaching. Concerning doctrine, many differences exist between the two men; in particular, the Platonic theory of ideas was subjected to severe and detailed criticism by Aristotle. But the grave differences should not blind us to the many points of agreement, nor to the extent that Aristotle learnt from Plato.

¹ Cf. XII, 9.