

## Chapter 3: Ancient Greek Philosophy

**Overview:** For some scholars, ancient Greek philosophy *is* philosophy. That's how important these ancients are to the Western tradition. These Greeks turned away from mythology to ground explanations in the observation of natural processes and rational arguments.

**Major Ideas:** After reading the material in this chapter and hearing the lecture, you should understand the following major ideas in depth, but other parts of the reading may appear on the assessment (besides names and dates).

### *PreSocratics and Sophists*

Reason

Logos

Atoms

Determinism

Relativism

Pragmatism

### *Socrates and Plato*

The Socratic Method

Socratic Ignorance

The Allegory of the Cave

The Theory of Forms

Plato's Concept of Soul

### *Aristotle*

Naturalism

Forms as Essences

Causality/Teleology

Aristotle's Concept of Soul

Eudaimonia

## Presocratics and Sophists

The Presocratics were the first known Western philosophers, whose home was ancient Greece. Much of the philosophy discussed in this chapter happened in the thriving city of ancient Athens, home to the Acropolis whose ruins can still be visited today. As the term implies, Presocratics were the philosophers who existed before Socrates (this shows you how important Socrates remains to philosophy in general).

These first Western philosophers arose in a world of mythology, in a world where the explanations for the mysteries of existence were the interactions of Gods and Goddesses.<sup>1</sup> Why did your crops die? You must have done something to displease the Gods. While the idea of Gods and Goddesses interacting may sound strange to us, we should keep in mind that the difference between mythology and religion is not entirely clear. In fact, one famous scholar, Joseph Campbell (1904-1987 c.e.), argued for many years that all religions have a mythological structure.<sup>2</sup> As we will see later, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche asked what the real difference is between the Gods that other cultures believe in, and the God that present day Christians, Muslims, and Jews believe in.

But anyway, moving away from mythology, the Presocratics sought explanations that were *rational*, that were based on ideas that built upon each other. This rationality is the precursor to what you learned about reason (good arguments, no fallacies or biases) in the first chapter. However strange their initial explanations seem, we have to remember that these first philosophers were trying something new and different, something that reached beyond mythological explanations.

After the Presocratics, we will discuss the sophists: wandering teachers, often from outside Athens, who believed that truth and morality are relative to cultures or individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Graves, R. (Ed.). (1981). *The Greek Myths: Volumes 1 & 2*. Aylesbury, Bucks: Penguin.

<sup>2</sup> See some of his collected works in: Campbell, J. (2008). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Novato, CA: New World Library.

## Presocratic Philosophers

Imagine that you are trying to explain how the world works, but you cannot appeal to a metaphysical force (like the Gods) as an explanation? How would you explain what's happening around you? Well one of the questions that the Presocratics tried to answer without reference to the Gods is this: what is the nature of the world around us? What is it made out of? Now you, as a present day student, might say that this question is an easy one—obviously the world is made up of matter, composed of atoms, right? Wrong. You can only give that answer because scientists have proven it, and you were taught about science in school. The Presocratics existed before science as we know it (they are sometimes seen as the first scientists), so they had to come up with an explanation from scratch.

Thales (624-545 b.c.e.), the first known Western philosopher, said that the world is made up of water. For Thales, water is the fundamental, underlying substance that gives rise to everything we see.

Since the earth appears to be still in our day to day lives, Anaximander (611-546 b.c.e.) wanted to know what makes it still, what keeps it “up” in the first place. What is holding the earth up? Again, a strange question today, but not so strange in a time before our current scientific understanding of the universe. Anaximander's answer was that the earth has a sort of geometric equilibrium that keeps it in place. But it's not the answer that is important, it's the method. By asking for the reason for the existence of something, Anaximander was using what we now know as *the principle of sufficient reason*, the idea that everything happens for a reason, every event has some prior cause (an insight that is important to determinism, as we will see soon).

## Logos

Heraclitus (500 b.c.), another important Presocratic, sought an underlying principle (or sufficient reason) for the stages of the stuff around us (what we would call *matter* today). If stuff/matter goes

through different stages, what holds it all together? Heraclitus thought it was something called *logos*. A complicated idea in ancient Greece and beyond, for Heraclitus, *logos* was the underlying principle of all things, what unified everything. Since Heraclitus was *logos* as a metaphysical, supernatural thing, some have compared his view of *logos* to the Tao of the ancient Chinese philosophers.

The word *logos* itself was dynamic in ancient Greece, sometimes referring to word, study, discourse, dialogue, and more. The *logos* is still part of many Western languages today in terms of word origins. For example, in the word *psychology*, the second half of the word, *logy*, can be traced to *logos*. The same is true for psychology in Spanish—*psicología*. The *logía* can be traced to *logos*.

Heraclitus also made a distinction between the way things *appear*, and the way things *really are*. This is a theme that will arise again and again in this class and beyond, especially when we reach Plato later in this chapter. For Heraclitus, a guitar string appears to be at rest when you observe it, but really it is in constant tension. Sometimes people appear to be nice, but deep down they are not, or vice versa. Can you think of any other examples of something that appears differently than it really is?

Just as happens with science today, the Presocratics listened to and responded to the ideas of other Presocratics. Another idea that many of them addressed was called *the problem of the one and the many*: if there is one underlying substance in the universe (*logos*), then why does it appear to be many things (trees, people, buildings, etc.)?

Parmenides (5<sup>th</sup> century b.c.e.) reasoned, like Heraclitus, that there is a difference between appearance and reality. While it appears that things change, at the fundamental level of reality, things do not change. For Parmenides, the fundamental level of reality is *being*. He thought *being* was eternal since *being* could not have come from nothing. *Nothing*, *being* by nature nothing, cannot produce *something*, he reasoned. Thus *being* is an eternal, unchanging thing.

Pretty abstract and weird, right? Maybe so, but later Christian and Muslim philosophers would use the idea that *something cannot come from nothing* in their arguments for the existence of God.

## Atoms

There were many answers given to the problem of the one and the many at the time, but we will now look at the most famous answer that is still with us today. Some Presocratics posited the existence of small entities that combine in certain ways to form other, larger objects at our level of experience. Those small entities were called *atoms* and the larger entities they form are people, chairs, grains of sand, and so forth. Thus atoms were thought by the Presocratics to be the ultimate building blocks of life. You cannot divide atoms further, there is nothing smaller, they argued. Indeed, the word atom itself means *indivisible*. Atoms alone cannot be sensed or seen, but when combined with other atoms, they become visible to us, according to some Presocratic philosophers.

Democritus (460-370 b.c.e.), who ultimately developed atomism, made a distinction that went beyond the one Parmenides tried to make between being and not being. Basically, Democritus said that even being can have empty space. The term he used for this empty space was *void*. Interestingly, Democritus thought there was no order to the universe, no guiding intelligence. He thought atoms came together based on some sort of internal logic that needs no outside explanation. He thought elements of the world could be predicted if we only had the proper knowledge.

Today we know that atoms exist because their existence has been proven by scientists with more advanced technology than the ancient Greeks had at their disposal. There is an important lesson here about metaphysical speculation: as abstract and weird as it may seem, sometimes such speculation can advance our general knowledge as humans. While the Presocratics were wrong about atoms in some ways (they *are*, in fact, divisible) they were right about their general existence.

But the existence of atoms also leads us to a famous idea within philosophy called *determinism*.

## **Determinism**

Do you have free will? If so, how can you prove it? Probably some of you will say the proof of your free will is the fact that you can raise your hand right now if you want to, or stop reading, or jump up and start singing. But if you did any of those things, how can you be sure that the cause was really your free choice? What if it just *seems* like you're making the choice? In fact, what if your choice itself is just an illusion? Consider that an ant in an ant farm may feel free from its perspective, and yet it is actually in a cage.

*Free will* can be defined like this: an action is within your power and you could have done otherwise. You raised your hand to the left, but you could have raised it to the right. You are reading this chapter right now, but you could have chosen not to read it. That's free will.

But what if you couldn't have chosen not to do what you are currently doing? What if the past events of the universe, guided by the laws of nature, actually determined your current behavior and even thoughts? After all, if you're thinking that you're actually free, then you are only thinking that because you're reading about not being free—a prior cause. Let's look at the formal, basic argument for determinism (remember, an argument is just a series of rational statements that logically lead to another statement called the conclusion):

1. The physical world is determined by the past and laws of nature.
  2. Humans are part of the physical world.
- Thus, humans are determined (not free).

Let's unpack this argument. The past just refers to every event that came before the present moment, stretching all the way to the first cause of the universe, if there is one. (We will talk later about a first cause to the universe, God, but for now, all that matters is that there are prior causes

leading backwards into time). And the laws of nature are just scientific laws, like the laws of motion, relativity, and so forth.

But the crucial step in this argument is the premise about humans. It's not hard to accept that a billiard ball is determined to go into the corner pocket when hit with the right force from the cue ball (a prior cause). But it's much more difficult to accept that *humans are like billiard balls*. And that's exactly what the determinist argument says: we are just like billiard balls with no ultimate control over our lives. We are guided along by the past and natural laws just like physical objects.

But there is an even bigger problem if determinists are right. If humans are determined, then it seems to have deep implications for morality. After all, the reason we blame someone for stealing is because we believe they *could* have done otherwise and not stolen. But if they are determined, then they *couldn't* have done otherwise. This seems to suggest that we should not blame people, including murderers, for their behavior. But notice that the opposite is also true: we should not praise people either for the supposedly good things they've done since, if determined, they did not choose to do those things.

Determinism is a complicated, controversial idea with many implications for our criminal justice system. To what extent should we blame criminals for their behavior? If they are determined, should we have a more compassionate view?

As distasteful as determinism seems—who wants to give criminals a free pass?—it is difficult to argue against. What rational reasons can you present as to why you're free? Remember if you just say "I feel free" you are not actually giving rational reasons, you're just using the appeal to emotion fallacy.

## **The Sophists**

Following the Presocratics were sophists, ancient philosophers who believed that truth and morality are only a matter of

appearance/perspective and that language can be manipulated to make anything seem “right” or “wrong,” “true” or “false.” During the time of the sophists in ancient Athens, many Athenians were ethnocentric (they believed their ways were superior to those of other cultures). Since Athens was a trade center, Athenians were challenged by the people from other cultures coming to the city. In fact, the word *barbarian* is often traced back to this time. Since Greek was the primary language of Athens, when people who spoke other languages came to the city they were often ridiculed, using the phrase “bar bar bar” like “blah blah blah.” Hence the term bar-bar-ians.

Most sophists came from outside of Athens and offered to teach their worldly wisdom—for a price. They are sometimes said to be the first to charge for their teachings, something which Socrates would eventually dispute. The sophists are also often said to be the first to ask *what is true?* coming to the conclusion that there is, in fact, no objective truth. In other words, they thought it was possible to argue the “truth” of any position based on your feelings for that position. Being right or wrong has nothing to do with it since there is no ultimate right or wrong; gaining the upper hand or the power in an argument or debate was the most important thing to a sophist.

## **Relativism**

This, of course, leads us into *relativism*, the belief that knowledge or morality only exists in the eye of the observer. Another way to think of this is “truth for me” and “truth for you.” There is no other kind of truth, thought the sophist. Or it could be “truth for my culture” and “truth for your culture.” This is the difference between individual relativism and cultural relativism.

As implied above, relativism can also be applied to morality: “right for you” and “right for me,” or “right for my culture” and “right for your culture.”

Undoubtedly, the idea of relativism has occurred to some of you. Even among close friends, there are usually differences in interpretation in terms of what is right or what is true. For instance, one person might think prostitution is wrong. And the person who has no problem with prostitution thinks eating meat is wrong. What do we make of these differences? Is there any objective truth or morality? Is there something that everyone believes is right or wrong in every situation?

It's easier to argue against relativism about morality than it is to argue against relativism about truth. After all, if you argue that truth is relative, then you have to say that scientific facts (which are true) are also relative. And yet, science works. Is all our knowledge of how to build airplanes just relative? If so, then would a true relativist be willing to fly in an airplane built by a high school dropout? After all, the dropout's version of truth is "just as true" as the mechanical engineer's who typically works on airplanes.

Relativism is complicated, but one thing that is important to remember is that relativism is a hypothesis/argument, not a fact. For example, the typical reason given to believe in moral relativism is that different cultures have different ideas of right and wrong behavior. This is just one piece of evidence for relativism, not a scientific proof. Plus, although cultures have different ideas of right and wrong behavior at the surface level (like in terms of greetings and table manners), at a deeper level ideas of right and wrong are often shared—like murder or stealing being wrong.

Relativism, whether moral or truth-related, also suffers from a potential contradiction. Relativism claims that *all* values are relative. But isn't relativism itself a value? So is *it* relative? If relativism itself is relative, then there doesn't seem to be a reason why we should accept it over any other theory (since all are relative). But if relativism itself is objective, then it contradicts the claim that all values are relative, it contradicts itself.

## Pragmatism

Protagoras (481-411 b.c.e.), the most famous sophist, took a complex look at the idea of relativism. He began by claiming that relativism is basically correct. If truth is relative to cultures and to people then where do we go from there?

*Pragmatism* is the solution. Pragmatism is the idea that, since there is no objective truth, what is important is what *works* (that is, what is pragmatic). To the extent that ideas are useful to us, they are meaningful, said Protagoras. Protagoras espoused a go with the flow attitude toward life: realize that the customs of your society are simply that, *your* customs, but follow them anyway to be practical. Why make a scene at work because your boss wants you to do something you don't want to? Just do it, says Protagoras. Why fight against a speeding ticket? Just pay it. No need to ruffle anyone's feathers.

As appealing as pragmatism seems to many people, critics have pointed out some its more disquieting implications. For example, if a pragmatist just goes with flow, what if he lives in a place like Nazi Germany? Then this pragmatist will simply go along with the "customs" that might include serious harm to certain groups of people. Or to take another example, is it "useful" for a mother to tell her kids there are demons in a nearby lake to prevent them from drowning?

In other words, when we trade practicality for truth or good moral judgment, it can lead us down a path we may not always want to go down.

# Socrates and Plato

## Socrates

Socrates (470-399 b.c.e.) is to this day an enigmatic figure. One of the central ancient Greek philosophers, most of what we know of him comes from the dialogues written by his greatest student, Plato (whom we'll study next). However, there were other writers of the time who mentioned Socrates, including the playwright Xenophon (430-354 b.c.e.). One of the problems with understanding Socrates is that we have different accounts from different writers. When Socrates was put on trial late in his life, Xenophon wrote a dialogue about the trial, claiming that Socrates was quite arrogant in his defense of himself.<sup>3</sup> But Plato also wrote a dialogue about the trial (famously called *The Apology*), instead claiming that Socrates defended himself more eloquently.<sup>4</sup> Although both Xenophon and Plato were students of Socrates who clearly respected him, we get different accounts of his life from each. So what was Socrates *really* like then? Unfortunately it's hard to know. This difficulty in understanding Socrates has even been given a name by scholars, *the Socratic problem*.<sup>5</sup>

Adding to the difficulty, Socrates himself did not write anything down, and in fact seems to have believed that writing was not the best medium for communication. For example, in a dialogue of Plato called *The Phaedrus*, Socrates tells the story of an Egyptian God who supposedly invented letters (or writing), focusing on the way the king responded to this invention:

This discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to

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<sup>3</sup> Xenophon. (2008). *Apology and Memorabilia Book 1*. M. D. Macleod (Ed.). Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press.

<sup>4</sup> It appears in: Plato. (2002). *Five Dialogues*. J. M. Cooper (Ed.) & C. M. A. Grube (Trans.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.

<sup>5</sup> In the following book, the author discusses some ways in which our current understanding of Socrates' trial may be flawed: Stone, I. F. (1989). *The Trial of Socrates*. New York: Anchor Books.

the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.<sup>6</sup>

It seems strange that someone as widely cited as one of the most intelligent people of all time would criticize writing itself as making us too forgetful. Can you imagine your English teacher making that argument?

But anyway, Socrates' refusal to write anything down contributes to the Socratic problem. And even the quote above from *The Phaedrus* itself was written by Plato, so it's hard to know whether Socrates really said it. In the end, as difficult a problem as it is, scholars have attempted to distinguish Socrates' philosophy from Plato's. And while the Socratic problem is a legitimate problem, we should remember that it can be difficult to understand the truth about *any* historical figure, including other famous ones like Jesus or Shakespeare.<sup>7</sup>

The picture of Socrates we get at its best is the fundamental philosophical archetype (remember that an archetype is an original model), what philosophers are supposed to be like. Socrates was *actually* wise and did not just appear that way. He was eloquent and had strength of character. He challenged people to give rational reasons for their beliefs, he challenged the status quo, and challenged authority. This positive image of Socrates comes primarily from the dialogues of Plato.

Socrates was also known to be homely or ugly. His appearance was fitting, however, since outer beauty was of no consequence to him. He was concerned with excellence of character, excellence of action, not

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<sup>6</sup> Plato. (2005). *Phaedrus*. C. Rowe (Trans.). New York, NY: Penguin.

<sup>7</sup> Regarding Jesus, see: Carrier, R. (2014). *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press.

physical appearance over which nobody has control. Socrates had such control of his mind and body that he was known to drink wine all night and never get drunk, never lose his ability to reason and philosophize at great length and in great detail.

Socrates often highlighted the importance of self control. If we give into every impulse, every desire, he reasoned, we cannot fully appreciate them. Socrates did not advocate abstinence or the inhibition of all desire (as some Eastern thinkers do); he advocated the use of restraint when necessary. Think about the difference between eating an incredible, fattening meal every night for dinner and eating the meal once a month. Won't you have a greater enjoyment of the meal if you have it less often rather than more often? Furthermore, it is difficult to cultivate likes and dislikes when you are only seeking the nearest pleasure. If you just want to get drunk, don't you simply search for the cheapest, easiest method? But then, how do you learn to appreciate the subtle differences in good beers or wines?

Socrates also knew himself well, and advocated for self-knowledge in general. Sometimes the phrase "the unexamined life is not worth living" is attributed to him. Socrates often used the Greek word *techne* to emphasize his point here—in this context *techne* refers to knowledge of theory as well as practice. In other words, a person with true self-knowledge has not just examined her beliefs in depth, but she has also applied that knowledge to her everyday life.

Socrates' character traits should take us back to Confucius in the last chapter who also believed in virtuous behavior. Recall that *virtue ethics* is a theory that says morality is primarily about cultivating positive character traits. By most accounts, Socrates was a quite virtuous person.

## **The Socratic Method**

In the dialogues of Plato, Socrates often uses *the Socratic method*. So deeply has this method been embedded in our culture that you have probably been a part of it, or observed it, without even knowing it.

Socrates thought that knowledge is in everyone, but that it needs to be drawn out of people by the right teacher. Thus, Socrates would ask people to continuously define and redefine terms in discussions, hoping to lead to a deeper understanding of the topics and, ultimately, the truth.

Unfortunately, without being properly educated, it can be difficult to see the difference between a heated, useless debate, and a rationally-guided disagreement/discussion. The Socratic method falls under the second category. Here is an example from another of Plato's dialogues, *The Euthyphro*:

Soc: In like manner holiness or piety is the art of attending to the gods?-that would be your meaning, Euthyphro?

Euth: Yes.

Soc: And is not attention always designed for the good or benefit of that to which the attention is given? As in the case of horses, you may observe that when attended to by the horseman's art they are benefited and improved, are they not?

Euth: True.

Soc: As the dogs are benefited by the huntsman's art, and the oxen by the art of the ox herd, and all other things are tended or attended for their good and not for their hurt?

Euth: Certainly, not for their hurt.

Soc: But for their good?

Euth: Of course.

Soc: And does piety or holiness, which has been defined to be the art of attending to the gods, benefit or improve them? Would you

say that when you do a holy act you make any of the gods better?

Euth: No, no; that was certainly not what I meant.

Soc: And I, Euthyphro, never supposed that you did. I asked you the question about the nature of the attention, because I thought that you did not.

Euth: You do me justice, Socrates; that is not the sort of attention which I mean.

Soc: Good: but I must still ask what is this attention to the gods which is called piety?

Euth: It is such, Socrates, as servants show to their masters.

Soc: I understand-a sort of ministration to the gods.

Euth: Exactly.

Soc: Medicine is also a sort of ministration or service, having in view the attainment of some object-would you not say of health?

Euth: I should.

Soc: Again, there is an art which ministers to the ship-builder with a view to the attainment of some result?

Euth: Yes, Socrates, with a view to the building of a ship.

Soc: As there is an art which ministers to the housebuilder with a view to the building of a house?

Euth: Yes.

Soc: And now tell me, my good friend, about the art which ministers to the gods: what work does that help to accomplish? For you must surely know if, as you say, you are of all men living the one who is best instructed in religion.

Euth: And I speak the truth, Socrates.

Soc: Tell me then, oh tell me-what is that fair work which the gods do by the help of our ministrations?

Euth: Many and fair, Socrates, are the works which they do.

Soc: Why, my friend, and so are those of a general. But the chief of them is easily told. Would you not say that victory in war is the chief of them?

Euth: Certainly.

Soc: Many and fair, too, are the works of the husbandman, if I am not mistaken; but his chief work is the production of food from the earth?

Euth: Exactly.

Soc: And of the many and fair things done by the gods, which is the chief or principal one?

Euth: I have told you already, Socrates, that to learn all these things accurately will be very tiresome. Let me simply say that piety or holiness is learning, how to please the gods in word and deed, by prayers and sacrifices. Such piety, is the salvation of families and states, just as the impious, which is unpleasing to the gods, is their ruin and destruction.

Soc: I think that you could have answered in much fewer words the

chief question which I asked, Euthyphro, if you had chosen. But I see plainly that you are not disposed to instruct me—dearly not: else why, when we reached the point, did you turn, aside? Had you only answered me I should have truly learned of you by this time the-nature of piety. Now, as the asker of a question is necessarily dependent on the answerer, whither he leads—I must follow; and can only ask again, what is the pious, and what is piety? Do you mean that they are a, sort of science of praying and sacrificing?

Euth: Yes, I do.

Soc: And sacrificing is giving to the gods, and prayer is asking of the gods?

Euth: Yes, Socrates.

Soc: Upon this view, then piety is a science of asking and giving?

Euth: You understand me capitally, Socrates.

Soc: Yes, my friend; the. reason is that I am a votary of your science, and give my mind to it, and therefore nothing which you say will be thrown away upon me. Please then to tell me, what is the nature of this service to the gods? Do you mean that we prefer requests and give gifts to them?

Euth: Yes, I do.

Soc: Is not the right way of asking to ask of them what we want?

Euth: Certainly.

Soc: And the right way of giving is to give to them in return what they want of us. There would be no, in an art which gives to any one that which he does not want.

Euth: Very true, Socrates.

Soc: Then piety, Euthyphro, is an art which gods and men have of doing business with one another?

Euth: That is an expression which you may use, if you like.

In the dialogue, Socrates is discussing piety (or religious devotion) with Euthyphro, a very religious person. There are a few things to recognize about the dialogue. First, notice the Socratic method at play: Socrates continues to ask for definitions of piety, then when Euthyphro provides one, Socrates critiques it and they refine the definition together.

Second, notice that Socrates also uses *irony* in this dialogue (irony is when something has a double meaning). At the beginning of the dialogue, he professes ignorance, asking to be schooled on piety by Euthyphro, and listening carefully to his definitions. But by the end, and after questioning Euthyphro in more depth, Socrates emerges as the truly wise one in the discussion.

### **Socratic Ignorance**

In Plato's *Apology* (referenced above), Socrates tells a famous story, leading to what we now call *Socratic ignorance*. We are accustomed to thinking of ignorance as a bad thing, but after this story I hope you'll see how at least one type of ignorance can be a good thing.

As the story goes, one of Socrates' friends once asked the Oracle if anyone was wiser than Socrates (Oracles in the ancient world were basically like fortune tellers). The Oracle said that, in fact, no one was wiser than Socrates. When Socrates heard this, he was confused, for he did not see himself as the wisest man, humble person that he was. In an attempt to disprove the Oracle's claim, he went around to different people who were supposedly wise. What he found surprised him. While these people professed to be filled with knowledge and wisdom, and

some of them were, in fact, somewhat knowledgeable), they still were not wise for one simple reason: they pretended to know things that they didn't know. Socrates concluded that he was wisest because *he realized that he didn't know*. The fact that he acknowledged his ignorance opened him up to actually *learn*.

If you claim to know things that you do not or cannot know, then you close yourself off from learning, you shut your mind down. Often the wisest people out there are very curious, they are interested in how things work. In Socrates' view, asking questions and being open is an indication of a good type of ignorance.

## **The Death of Socrates**

A discussion of Socrates wouldn't be complete without a discussion of his fitting death, which completes his life perfectly as a philosophical archetype. This story of Socrates also comes from Plato's *Apology*. Not surprisingly, he was charged with corrupting the youth and teaching about Gods not recognized by the state and put on trial. Although he gave an eloquent defense, the Athenian court still sentenced him to death by drinking hemlock (a type of poison). As the story goes, Socrates drank the hemlock willingly, despite the possibility of escape. As the poison took hold of his body, it moved from his feet upward. He was talking and philosophizing with students and followers the entire time, until the hemlock finally reached his brain—the last part of his body to go.

## **Plato**

As noted, Plato was a student of Socrates, probably his greatest and certainly most influential student. Plato's most famous work, *The Republic*, continues to be read today by both philosophers and non-philosophers.<sup>8</sup> Much of the information in textbooks that discuss Plato

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<sup>8</sup> Plato. (2011). *The Republic*. B. Jowett (Trans.). Digireads Publishing.

comes from *The Republic*, though as we've already seen he wrote many other dialogues too.

Plato himself was born into an elite Athenian family, and his birth name was Aristocles. Plato was simply a nickname given to him meaning *wide* or *broad* (either referring to his broad frame or head). Plato was also a veteran, having served in the Athenian military.

Plato eventually formed his own school called *The Academy*, which is where we get the words *academic* and *academia*. He was led to create the school by several changes in Athenian society brought about by the Peloponnesian Wars between Athens and Sparta (another city state competing for power in the ancient world). Spanning nearly 30 years, these wars brought changes to Athenian society that greatly influenced Plato. For one, Athens lost the war in the final stage, leading 30 tyrants to replace the Athenian democracy with an *oligarchy*, or rule by an elite group. Although democracy was eventually restored to Athens when the oligarchy's rule was unsuccessful, Plato rejected both forms of government when he started The Academy.

He rejected democracy because it was the people (or mob as he sometimes referred to them) who ultimately sentenced Socrates to death. Plato believed that democracy could not work since most people are uninformed. He rejected the oligarchy because he believed that there is much more to life than greed and power, in contrast to the 30 tyrants. We won't get into it in much depth in this class, but in *The Republic*, Plato presents his version of an ideal society. One point worthy of note is that Plato says an ideal society must be led by a *philosopher king*, or someone who has reached true wisdom and the highest level of understanding. Such a ruler would rule, in Plato's view, not because he wanted to, but because he was best suited to be a ruler. Plato also did not exclude women from being philosopher kings.

But how do we know when someone has, in fact, reached the highest level of understanding? To answer this question, we have to look deeper

into Plato's metaphysical views, beginning with his most famous story from *The Republic* called *The Allegory of the Cave*.

### **The Allegory of the Cave**

Plato's allegory is a timeless tale that most people can relate to in some way. The allegory has been used as a metaphor for religious truths, higher dimensions of reality, political behavior, and more. Although it is useful to think of different interpretations of the allegory, it is important to remember that Plato had a specific use for it in his philosophy. But let's begin with the central passage from the allegory itself where Socrates is conversing with a man named Glaucon:

Soc: Let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened. Behold! Human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

Gla: I see.

Soc: And do you see men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

Gla: You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.

Socrates: Like ourselves, and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

Gla: True, how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

Soc: And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they would only see the shadows?

Gla: Yes.

Soc: And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Gla: Very true.

Soc: And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passersby spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

Gla: No question.

Soc: To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

Gla: That is certain.

Soc: And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive someone saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision, what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them, will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?

Gla: Far truer.

Soc: And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take and take in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?

Gla: True.

Soc: And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he's forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.

Gla: Not all in a moment.

Soc: He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?

Gla: Certainly.

Soc: Last of he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of it in the water, but he will see it in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate it (the sun) as it actually is.

First of all, notice the continuation of the *appearance versus reality* theme that was begun by the Presocratics. The prisoners in the cave are unique in that what *appears* to be real (the shadows) is not what is *actually* real (outside the cave). To what extent are we, and most people, like the prisoners in the cave? Are we seeing reality as it actually is?

Plato would say, no, most people generally are not seeing reality as it actually is. To illustrate his point, Plato connects this allegory with his theory of forms, which we will now turn to.

### **The Theory of Forms**

To understand the theory of forms, we have to return temporarily to the sophists. Recall that the sophists were relativists, believing that there is no objective, universal truth or morality. Plato disagreed with relativism, and in fact strongly disliked the sophists. Plato believed in true, objective knowledge, not just relative knowledge. Plato believed that knowledge transcended opinions. So it is important to remember that Plato's theory of forms is to a large extent an argument against

relativism, an argument that there *are* objective truths and objective morality.

Let's see how Plato gets there. For one, Plato's theory is a type of *dualism*, or the metaphysical view that there is more than one type of stuff in the universe. By contrast, *monism* is the belief that there is one type of stuff in the universe. As we will see soon, Aristotle was a monist, since he believed that all of reality can be reduced to the natural world around us. If you believe in a soul, you are likely a dualist, since you believe that the universe contains physical stuff (like our bodies) as well as spiritual stuff (like our souls).

Plato's dualism suggests that the two types of stuff in the universe are 1) appearance, the physical world and 2) forms, a non-physical world of universals. So one part of reality is the sensible world of change: trees, people, skin cells, etc. Plato thought of this world as the way things *appear* to us, hence the world of appearance. Sophists are only concerned with the realm of appearances, thought Plato, because they only argue back and forth, manipulating the appearance of knowledge but not knowledge itself. This second world—not the one of appearances—is one of truth, and truth cannot change. This second world is eternal and outside of the realm of space and time, the world of forms.

There are many ways to illustrate Plato's theory of forms, but geometry is often the beginning point. For Plato, everything in the world of appearance refers back to its universal *form*. Can you draw a perfect triangle, even with a sophisticated computer program? Not likely, since whatever you draw will be imperfect in some minor way (even the pixels on a meticulously drawn triangle might be uneven from one side to the other). However, said Plato, all triangles that we observe exist because they draw from a perfect triangle in the world of forms. The world of forms is where we get all the blueprints, and the world of appearance just contains copies of those blueprints.

Plato's theory applies beyond geometry, and reaches to other shapes, organisms, and even moral truths. For example, for Plato, there is a perfect form for love, courage, honesty, and so forth. When you fall in love, you are merely *participating* in the perfect form of love. A wise person like Socrates is merely *participating* in the form of wisdom. Are there forms for bad things like hate? Not really, Plato said: hate is just a really bad attempt to participate in the form of love. Plato also said that there is an ultimate form—the form of the good—that illuminates all other forms.

So how exactly does Plato's theory counter relativism? Since relativism says that there is no universal truth, Plato's claim that forms are universal truths is a direct contradiction to relativism. In fact, Plato said that we can have true knowledge of forms, but only opinions of the world of appearance. For Plato, the sophists were stuck in the world of appearance, not even realizing that there are higher, universal truths to be known.

To return to the allegory of the cave, the sophists are stuck in the cave, staring at the shadows on the wall and falsely believing that they are real. But one who seeks and acquires universal truth has found true knowledge, and escaped the cave, metaphorically speaking.

### **How Can We Know the Forms Exist?**

As we will see, many people have questioned Plato's theory of forms over the years, including Aristotle. How can we be sure that these forms Plato refers to actually exist? Is there evidence of the forms?

Although Plato didn't call it this, one of his pieces of evidence for the forms is the Aha! moment. The Aha! moment is when something finally clicks, when you finally understand something. Maybe you've been working on a math problem for a long time, or trying to fix your computer, then suddenly it hits you, and you absolutely without question

know the answer or solution. Moments like this would not be possible, Plato argues, without the existence of universal truths, or the forms.

In his dialogue *The Meno*, a discussion between Socrates and a slave boy reveals the nature of the Aha!<sup>9</sup> At a certain point, Socrates has just, through questioning, got the boy to reveal his knowledge of a two foot by two foot square with two lines drawn horizontally and vertically through the middle. The boy knows it is a square, has sides of two feet, and has an area of four feet. Socrates keeps questioning. He asks the boy “Now could one draw another figure double the size of this, but similar, that is, with all its sides equal like this one?” Here the boy answers incorrectly about the area of the double-sized figure: he answers eight instead of sixteen.

After going through some Socrates style teaching, the boy realizes that the area of a figure double the size of a two foot square will be sixteen. As the dialogue goes:

Socrates: How big is it then, won't it be four times as big?

Boy: Of course.

Socrates: And is four times the same as twice?

Boy: Of course not.

Socrates: So doubling the sides has given us not a double but a fourfold figure?

Boy: True.

Socrates: And four times four are sixteen, are they not?

Boy: Yes.

What is important here is that the boy's attitude went from thinking he knew, *to actually knowing*. And his answers—like “of course,” “true,”

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<sup>9</sup> Find the dialogue in: Kaufmann, W. & F. E. Baird. (Eds.). (2003). *Ancient Philosophy* (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

and “yes”—are indicative of that fact. This is the Aha! feeling. To return to the theory of forms, in the dialogue Socrates helps the slave boy to tap into a universal form.

For Plato, the forms are eternal and will always exist even if the human race dies out. The implication of his theory is that if another species on another planet evolved to be as intelligent as humans, they could also participate in the forms.

Whatever side you take on the issue, Plato’s theory introduces a fairly deep question: do the truths of math (like  $2+2=4$ ) depend on human minds, or are they true independent of humans minds? I hope Plato’s answer to this question is clear at this point. We will also address this question in more depth later when we discuss the philosophy of science.

### **Plato’s Concept of Soul**

The final idea from Plato we’ll look at is much more straightforward than the theory of forms. Although we tend to see the soul as something immaterial, Plato saw it differently.

There are three parts of the soul for Plato: reason, spirit, and appetite. Plato defined reason the way it’s been defined thus far in this class. He defined spirit as a person’s will, and appetite as a person’s emotions. Plato thought that reason is what should rule the other two, though that’s not always the case. The relationship between the three is often represented by a horseman pulling two horses in a chariot. One horse is unruly and difficult to control—it represents appetite. The other horse can be controlled with a whisper—it represents spirit. And the horseman himself is reason. The idea is to keep reason in control of the other two horses.

Let’s put all this together and return briefly to the philosopher king. For Plato, the philosopher king will have developed his reason to such a high point that spirit and appetite barely afflict him. The philosopher king has also escaped the cave and is, therefore, not a relativist. These are the

ways in which the philosopher king has reached a higher level of understanding and wisdom, and is prepared to be a just ruler.

## Aristotle

Just as Plato was a student of Socrates, Aristotle was a student of Plato. As with other philosophers from this time, the details of Aristotle's life are not completely clear. But he seems to have been sent off to Plato's Academy as a young man, eventually earning a reputation as one of the brightest students. Aristotle stayed with Plato for around 20 years—though Aristotle greatly respected Plato as a mentor, he would disagree with Plato on some issues, as we'll see.

Aristotle was lined up to be the head of the academy when Plato died, but the position was given to a native Athenian—because Aristotle was born in a small Greek community outside of Athens, he was seen by some as a foreigner.

The next stage of Aristotle's life led him to tutor some would be philosopher kings, one of whose daughter, Pythias, he married. Later he married another woman and had a son, Nichomachus, to whom he dedicated his work *Nichomachean Ethics*. Famously, Aristotle tutored the boy who would become the king Alexander the Great (or Alexander the Terrible if you're from Persia). Alexander was greatly influenced by Aristotle and known to be a fairly intellectual king, often collecting specimens from nature in his travels for Aristotle to study.

Aristotle eventually founded his own school called *The Lyceum*, dedicated to the God Apollo Lyceus. Aristotle's school, unlike Plato's, was focused on the study of the natural world, and he was often seen wandering with his students as he taught. Unfortunately, Aristotle's works are mostly lost to history. What we do have are either his lecture notes or notes taken by his students.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Much of the philosophy from Aristotle discussed in this chapter can be seen in this work in more depth: Aristotle. (2001). *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. R. McKeon. (Ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

When Alexander the Great died, Aristotle found that he had little political protection, and he was eventually charged, like Socrates, for teaching about Gods not recognized by the state. But unlike Socrates, Aristotle fled to a Greek island, in his words “lest Athens sin twice against philosophy.”

## **Naturalism**

A *naturalist* is one who believes that reality is made up of the natural world. It is important to remember that naturalism is a type of monism, the belief that there is only one substance in the universe. What is the stuff in the universe for Aristotle? Natural, observable stuff, like people, the moon, the sun, trees, dogs, and so forth. It is also important to note that this view, naturalism, by definition denies the presence of supernatural things, like ghosts or spirits.

Let’s contrast Aristotle’s and Plato’s metaphysical views (remember, a metaphysical view is a view of *reality*). Aristotle believes there is only one substance in the universe, natural stuff. But Plato believes there are two substances, which is why he’s a dualist. Recall that Plato believes reality is divided into what we can observe in the natural world (the world of appearance), but unlike Aristotle he also believes in a world that is not natural or physical, the world of forms.

Naturalism is a very popular worldview among contemporary scientists. After all, the natural world is exactly what, for example, physicists are working with in their experiments. And in fact we call some of what physicists have discovered the laws of *nature*. Hard scientists especially are asking the question, how does nature work? Which is why so many identify as naturalists.

Sometimes the naturalist worldview is denigrated by non-naturalists for being pessimistic, or for supposedly implying meaninglessness. After all, notice that a naturalist would typically reject a belief in a supernatural entity like God, and doesn’t God give life meaning?

The questions of meaning and God, and their relationship, will come up a few other times in this class. But for now, it's worth pointing out how a naturalist typically responds to claims that his worldview leads to meaninglessness. For one, a naturalist points out that he can still fall in love, learn to play the guitar, visit Paris, and so forth. In other words, a naturalist can find meaning *within this world*. And secondly, a naturalist points out the intrigue of the natural world itself. Let's not forget that the natural world includes things like planets, dark matter, black holes, nebulae, parallel dimensions (possibly), and more. Far from being pointless, the naturalist argues, the natural world itself is filled with wonder and amazement.

### **Forms as Essences**

As noted above, Aristotle had some disagreements with Plato. And he was faced with a dilemma, because he did agree with Plato that the sophists were wrong about knowledge being relative. Aristotle, like Plato, believed that we could find universal truth and morality. However, Aristotle did *not* believe in some heavenly, otherworldly realm of forms. So on the one hand, Aristotle was not a relativist, but on the other, he was a naturalist, so he did not believe in some higher dimension of reality. How did he reconcile these seemingly disparate beliefs? He claimed that forms are a *part of* nature, or *within* nature.

However, for Aristotle, the forms don't actually exist literally within nature, but they exist as *essences*, or unifying thoughts. For example, if we took all the pencils on the planet earth, each and every pencil would be different from the other. And yet, for Aristotle, they would still share the essence of being a pencil, or *pencilness*. Similarly, we are all different as human beings, and yet we share *humanness*. In other words, Aristotle is saying that the natural world itself consists of unifying forms, but also matter. Everything in nature is simply matter that is based on some universal form. Thus was Aristotle able to reject relativism and Plato's metaphysics while retaining objectivity.

However, Aristotle was concerned not just with what exists, but with how matter *changes*. Our foray into ancient Greek philosophy began with a desire for rational explanations from the Presocratics. What the Presocratics began, Aristotle rigorously extended.

### **Causality/Teleology**

The question of how matter changes would today be discussed in relation to *causality*. What causes the eight ball to go in the corner pocket? The cue ball hitting the eight ball is the cause. And what causes the cue ball to move toward the eight ball? The person hitting it with the pool stick is the cause. Causality seems natural to us because today scientists have discovered many causes in nature, from the laws of physics to flu vaccines. But causality wasn't always so clear cut (and in fact is *still* not all that clear cut<sup>11</sup>).

So let's return to Aristotle's question: how does change occur in nature? For Aristotle, change within matter is goal-directed and occurs in stages. All matter is moving towards its ultimate form, or goal. Everything is moving towards its fullest *potential*. An acorn has the form of an unmaterialized oak tree, the acorn just hasn't reached its ultimate goal yet.

Aristotle's view is said to be *teleological*, meaning that it focuses on meaning and purpose. Teleology is just the study of purpose. *Telos* is the Greek word for purpose, and we already know that *logos* means *the study of* in this context—hence teleology is the study of purpose. For Aristotle, everything in nature has a purpose, a meaning. Everything fits with everything else. Notice that the purpose Aristotle refers to is within nature itself, and not from the outside. For Aristotle, a supernatural

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<sup>11</sup> Even in health science, some studies show correlations between consuming particular foods and negative health outcomes that are later contradicted. Even scientists can succumb to the correlation is not causation fallacy. For more info regarding causation in health, see. Taubes, G. (2016). *The Case Against Sugar*. New York, NY: Random House.

being like God isn't necessary to have purpose, since nature already contains purpose within itself.

In what way does nature have purpose? Aristotle said there are four causes that explain every aspect of change in nature: material, formal, efficient, and final.

The material cause is the matter, the physical makeup of something. The formal cause is the shape or form of that matter. The efficient cause is the triggering event, what led the matter to be shaped the way it is. And the final cause is the ultimate purpose or goal of the thing in question. Let's analyze this chapter with the four causes. The material cause is the paper and bindings. The formal cause is the literal, rectangular shape of the reader itself. The efficient cause is my writing the reader and the publisher putting it together. And the final cause is for the learning of my students.

So we can see why causality and teleology (purpose) go together for Aristotle: everything is moving along a causal path toward a goal.

But is the final cause always clear? The acorn is completed or finished when it becomes a full oak. A song is finished or completed when the musicians feel like there is nothing else they can add. Aristotle thought that every thing has some sort of *urge* to fully realize itself. This urge or guiding principle he referred to as *entelechy*. Of course, not everything reaches its final cause. An infant may die in a car accident, preventing her from growing into a fully realized adult. A plant may not get enough sun, preventing it from fully realized plantness.

What about the final cause of humans? To some extent the final cause or goal depends on where we decide to establish the goal post. In a common story of three bricklayers, each is asked what they are doing as they lay their bricks. One says "I am laying a brick," the next says, "I am building this arch," and the next says, "I am building this cathedral."

None of them are wrong about their purposes, they have just set different goal posts.

Despite the ambiguity of assigning a singular purpose for humans, Aristotle still believed that there are some objective standards that make some lives more meaningful than others—he called a fully realized life *eudaimonia*. We will return to this idea, but first it's important to see Aristotle's concept of the soul, and how he thought humans were different from animals.

### **Aristotle's Concept of Soul**

Though Plato and Aristotle saw the soul differently, they both thought reason was an important component. Not surprisingly, Aristotle saw the soul in a naturalistic way, as something that existed within nature. He did not see the soul as something supernatural, but as something intimately bound up with our physical bodies. Aristotle also thought other organisms in nature had souls, but with less potential than human souls. Sometimes Aristotle is said to be the father of modern science in that he was one of the first to divide up nature into categories, just as scientists do now with labels like *genus* and *species*. His concept of soul is one of the best examples of this sort of division. He posits a hierarchy of souls, where each higher level of soul contains elements of the lower levels.

Aristotle called the lowest level of soul with the least potential the *vegetative* soul. This sort of soul belongs to creatures that absorb matter, like worms or amoebas. The next level is the *sensitive* soul: creatures that can feel and sense the environment, like lions or mice. And the soul with the most potential is the *rational* soul: creatures like humans who can not only absorb and sense the environment, but who can also deliberate and engage in moral decisions.

An interesting question arises here about the difference between humans and animals. Aristotle believed that humans have more potential since

we are more rational, but can we draw the same conclusion today with our more advanced understanding of the animal kingdom? After all, some animals seem to be quite advanced intellectually and even morally, like monkeys, orcas, elephants, and more.<sup>12</sup>

Like many questions we will address in this class, this is not a simple one. Are we just different than animals in terms of degree or in kind? Are we just slightly more advanced/evolved than other animals? Or do we fundamentally have a different nature?

Whatever view you take on the matter, Aristotle believed that humans were superior and had more potential than other animals, which leads us finally to his idea human happiness, or eudaimonia.

## **Eudaimonia**

It's probably fair to say that today the word *happiness* is loaded. A common connotation of happiness is simply *feeling* happy in the moment. In other words, we tend to think of happiness as a transitory thing. If you ever feel a moment of despair or sadness, this may lead you and others to believe that you are generally not very happy.

Not for Aristotle. For Aristotle, happiness, or what he called eudaimonia, is a *process*. Eudaimonia is not a temporary state. In fact, a better translation from the Greek for eudaimonia is probably *human flourishing*. Aristotle saw eudaimonia as a complex process that depends on luck, looks, social standing, health, and more. For example, if you are born into a lower social class, it may be harder to get the resources you need to truly do what you want and flourish. While it may seem almost superficial to put restrictions on who can really flourish, it's important to note that Aristotle is only saying these factors make one more likely to reach eudaimonia. For Aristotle, anyone can technically reach

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<sup>12</sup> Most people are aware that some animals can exhibit some level of intelligence, but that some animals exhibit apparently moral behavior is less well known. For an introduction to the moral behavior of animals, see primatologist Frans de Waal's TED talk: [https://www.ted.com/talks/frans\\_de\\_waal\\_do\\_animals\\_have\\_morals](https://www.ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_do_animals_have_morals).

eudaimonia. Socrates, for example, was known to be ugly and he certainly flourished. Also, one might possess all the necessary factors to be happy, and still not really get there—like a wealthy person who doesn't know how to use his wealth to help him flourish.

Basically, to be experiencing eudaimonia, you must be fully living your life and experiencing the range of possible experiences and emotions. For example, you *should* be experiencing the great pain of loss in some way, due to the loss of a loved one, a breakup, or something similar. You *should* be experiencing things like this, because they are part of the process of growth and development that are necessary for eudaimonia. But you should also be experiencing great joy, like the birth of your child, or experiencing a beautiful sunset on a Greek island.

Life is supposed to be hard and painful sometimes, and other times it's supposed to be easy and joyful—it's all part of the process of human flourishing, or eudaimonia.