

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

Questions of philosophy might not appear to have much to do with everyday survival. But philosophers still look for convincing answers. Sometimes they get them, often they don't.

BUT THE QUESTIONS, ONCE ASKED, SEEM NEVER TO GO AWAY.

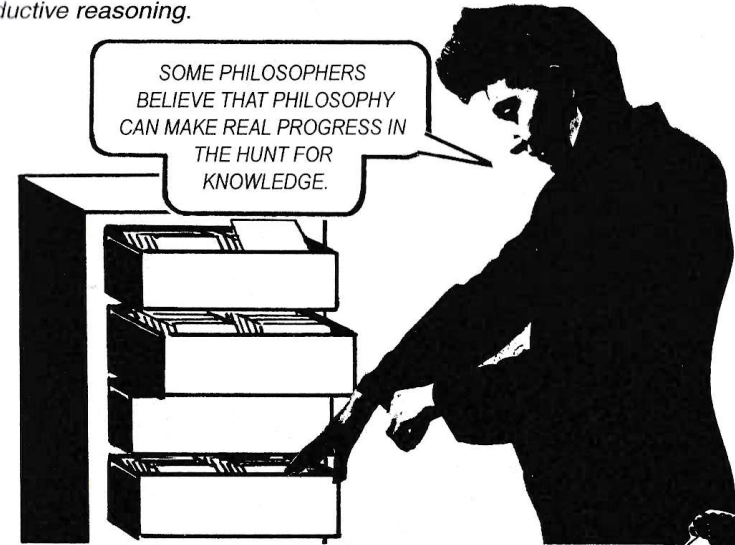
ORIGINALLY, "PHILOSOPHERS" WERE JUST INDIVIDUALS WHO ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT EVERYTHING.

NOWADAYS, PHILOSOPHY TENDS TO GET CLASSIFIED MORE RIGOROUSLY.



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Some philosophers believe that philosophy must evolve out of *argument* and *debate*, others that it can only ever be produced from *deductive reasoning*.



OTHERS SAY THAT IT IS "THINKING ABOUT THINKING" AND DOES NO MORE THAN HELP TO CLARIFY IDEAS AND REMOVE MISUNDERSTANDINGS.

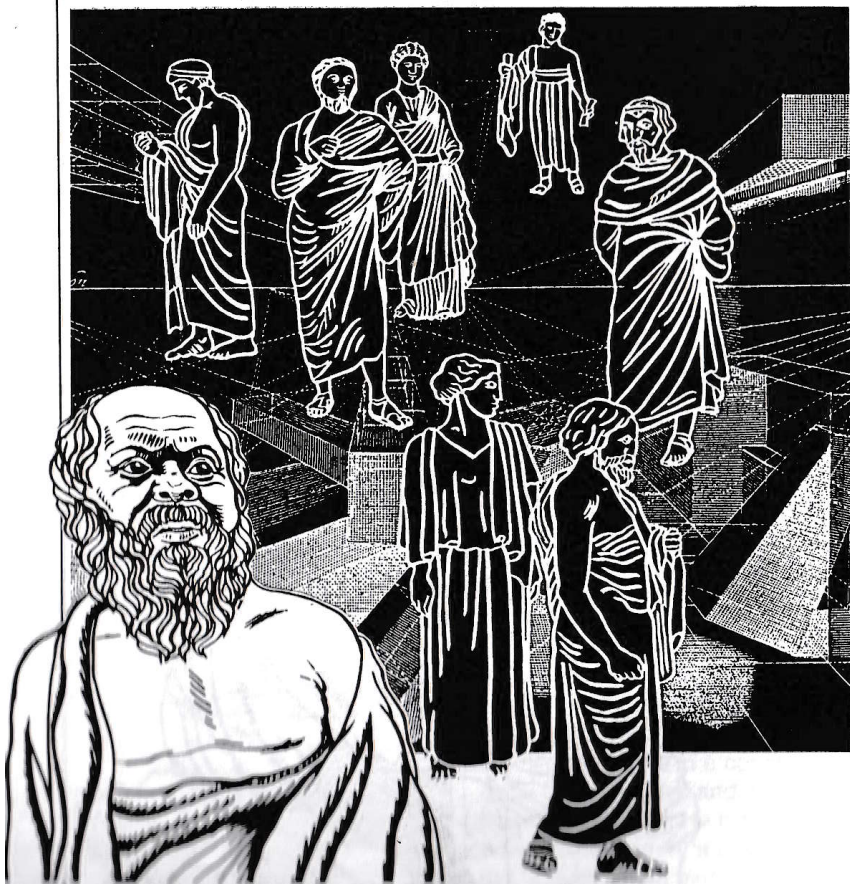


But all of them believe that philosophers are obliged to provide some kind of explanation, proof or evidence for their ideas. And this obligation marks the one obvious difference between philosophy and religion.

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INTRODUCING SOCRATES

All these theories of mind and the ultimate nature of the world are known as "pre-Socratic". What is remarkable about these conjectures is how close some of them got to 20th century scientific theory. They got to this stage, not by using particle accelerators, but just by thinking very hard.



Socrates (470-399 B.C.) lived in 5th century B.C. Athens, a small "city-state" with a powerful Mediterranean empire. Many Athenians were slave-owners, which gave them plenty of leisure time in which to invent things like drama, history, astronomy and philosophy. They thought they were the most civilized nation on earth, and they probably were.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Herodotus (484-424 B.C.) the historian had travelled extensively beyond Greece and made some startling discoveries about the beliefs and behaviour of other societies. Sophist philosophers like Protagoras (490-420 B.C.) saw the full implications of this. It led him to ask some worrying questions.

IF OTHER
PEOPLE BELIEVE
IN DIFFERENT THINGS
TO YOU, HOW DO YOU
KNOW THAT YOUR
BELIEFS ARE RIGHT?
HOW DO YOU KNOW
THAT ANYONE'S BELIEFS
ARE RIGHT?



It's always easy to believe that your beliefs are "natural" when they are only "cultural". So, the Sophists changed the subject of philosophical investigation from the One Big Question to different ones about human beings and their societies.

PROTAGORAS THE SOPHIST

Protagoras said that “Man is the measure of all things” – which means that there are no objective truths, only limited human beliefs. This makes him sound very relativist and even postmodern. He also claimed that philosophy was really no more than rhetoric or the art of verbal persuasion (a useful skill to have in debates) and that learning this skill made his students “good men”.



Socrates was a small, scruffy and ugly little man with a snub nose. His father was a stonemason and his mother a midwife. His own wife Xantippe sold vegetables and often found her husband infuriatingly vague. But he was clearly a kind of charismatic guru for many young Athenians, perhaps because he taught them to question **everything** – an odd habit which no doubt irritated their parents.

SOCRATIC DIALOGUE

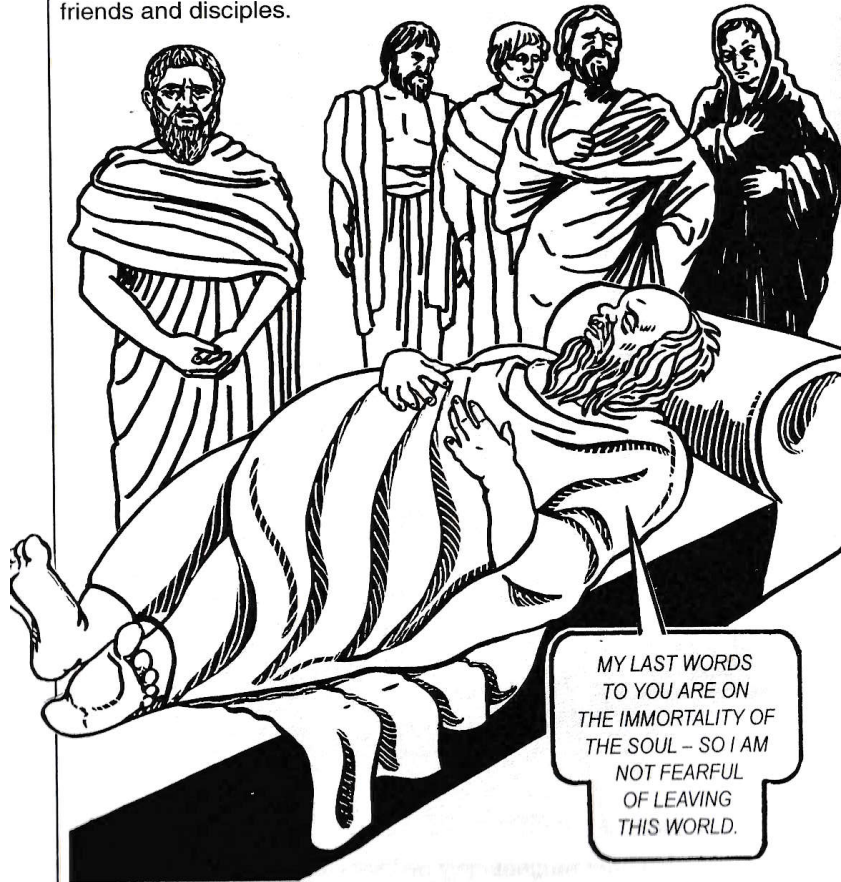
Socrates always claimed that he knew nothing, which is why the Delphic oracle called him “the wisest man in Greece”. He actively encouraged his students to argue about ideas, usually to show them how hard it is to produce satisfactory answers to philosophical questions. The uncertainty that this irritating “Socratic dialogue” produced in people’s minds may explain why Socrates’ nickname was “the Gadfly”.



Nobody knows whether he genuinely believed that philosophical dialogue could discover the ultimate truths about concepts like “Justice” so that they could then be applied to specific moral and political problems. His central belief was that true moral wisdom lay in the self, that “Virtue is knowledge”.

CONDEMNED TO DEATH

Unfortunately, Socrates had some dubious friends like Critias who systematically executed many Athenians who disagreed with the rule of the "Thirty Tyrants". When they were finally overthrown, a jury of Democrats took their revenge and the Gadfly was found guilty of impiety and corrupting young Athenians, and so condemned to death. He bravely swallowed hemlock poison after explaining his beliefs to his friends and disciples.



Socrates remains an ambiguous figure – a man who had bad taste in political allies, yet always defended the independent thinker against state morality. But he did change philosophy. Philosophical questions were now about human morality and politics, not about the innermost nature of the physical world.

PLATO AND THE PHILOSOPHER KINGS

Plato (427-347 B.C.) was one of Socrates' disciples, but, unlike his teacher, he was an instinctive authoritarian. He was an Athenian aristocrat and hated the Democrats who had condemned Socrates to death.

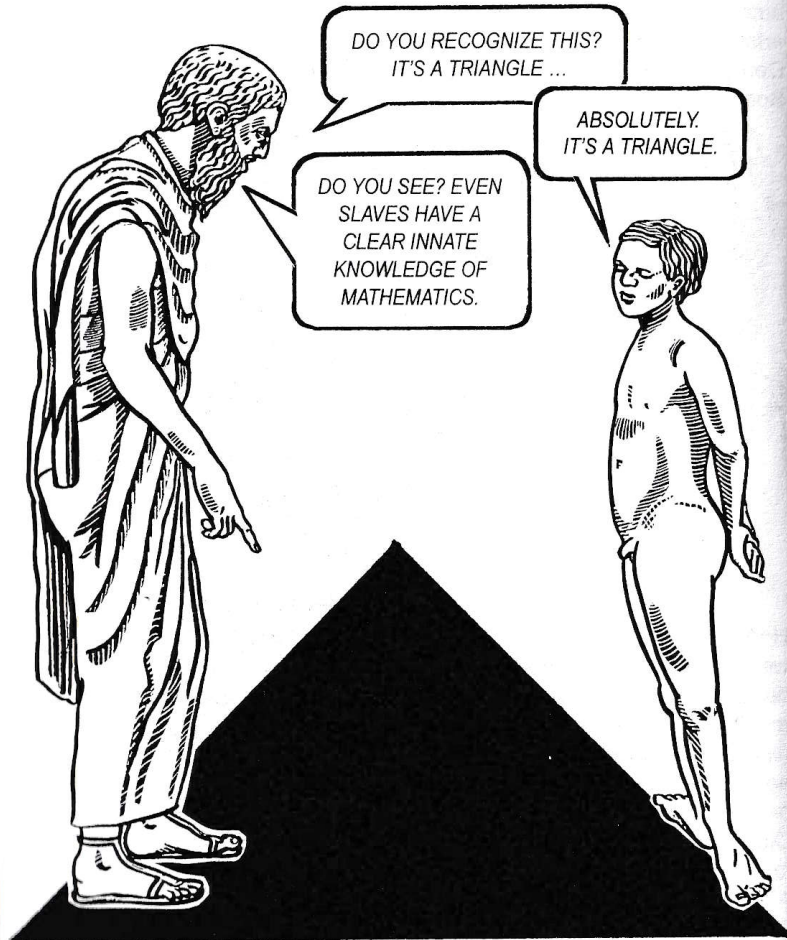
WHEN I OBSERVED ALL THIS ... I WITHDREW IN DISGUST FROM THE ABUSES OF THOSE DAYS.

He thought his fellow Athenians were becoming soft and decadent, and admired the ruthless militaristic Spartans who kept winning all the wars they fought against Athens. He eventually became a tutor to the son of Dionysius I of Sicily, a very reluctant student, and then returned to Athens to found his **Academy**. His most famous work is **The Republic**, which is his detailed blueprint for a harmonious and thus perfect society ruled over by wise philosopher-rulers.



THE DOCTRINE OF INNATISM

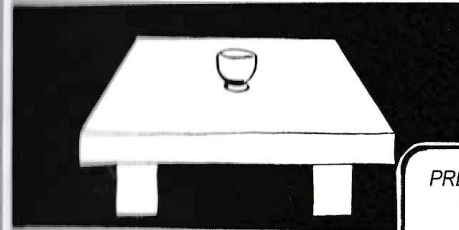
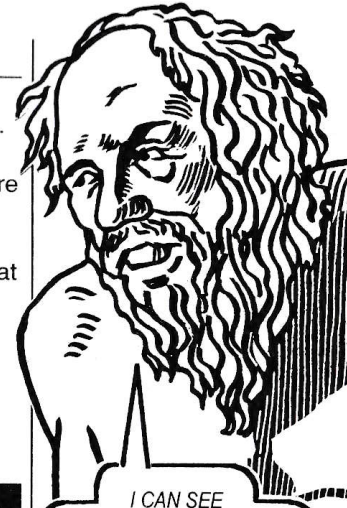
Plato enshrined the Socratic dialogue by writing his philosophy in this form. In his early writings, Plato gave respectability to the doctrine of **Innatism** – the belief that we are all born programmed with certain kinds of knowledge. He demonstrated this by questioning a young slave belonging to his friend Meno.



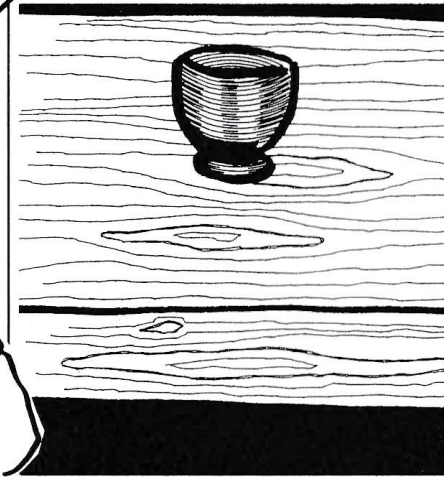
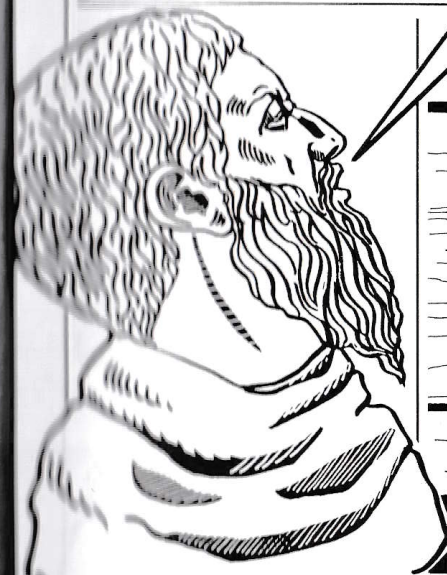
His explanation for this is that we all possess immortal souls which have had a previous existence, so that all learning is really just "recollection", or *anamnesis*.

THE IDEAL FORMS

This "recollected" view of knowledge helped to make Plato a "two world" man. Although there is the obvious and ordinary everyday world we can all see, there is also another one of eternal perfect "Forms". Forms are like perfect templates, so particular things like chairs that we all see in this world are just inferior copies of the pure or ideal Form of "Chairness". Only a few specially gifted and trained people whom he called "Guardians" can ever "see" these ideal Forms. Not everyone agreed with this.



PRECISELY. TO SEE A TABLE AND A CUP YOU NEED EYES, AND YOU HAVE THOSE. TO SEE TABLENESS AND CUPNESS, YOU NEED INTELLIGENCE, AND YOU DON'T HAVE THAT.



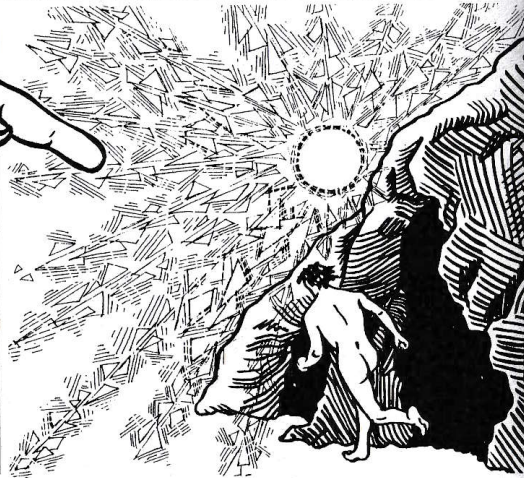
THE PARABLE OF THE CAVE

Plato explains his doctrine with a fable. Ordinary people are like prisoners permanently trapped in a dark cave and forced to watch a shadow puppet play which they think is "real".

WE ARE LIKE THESE PRISONERS, INDOCTRINATED FROM BIRTH TO BELIEVE THAT EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE IS ALL THERE IS.

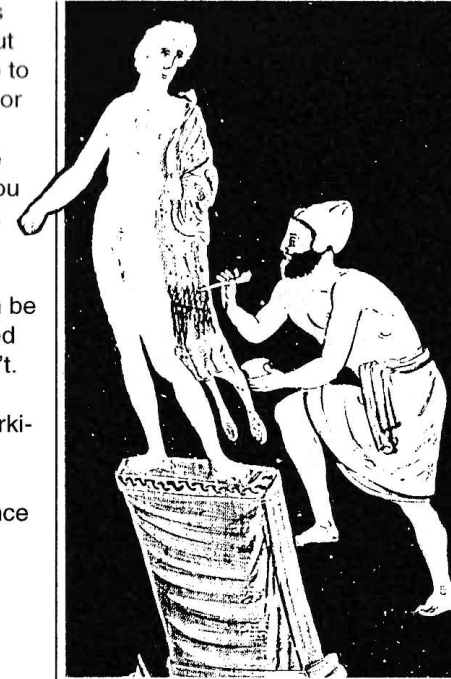


BUT ONE REBEL PRISONER ESCAPES INTO THE DAYLIGHT AND SOON FINDS THAT THERE IS A BETTER AND "MORE REAL" WORLD OUTSIDE.

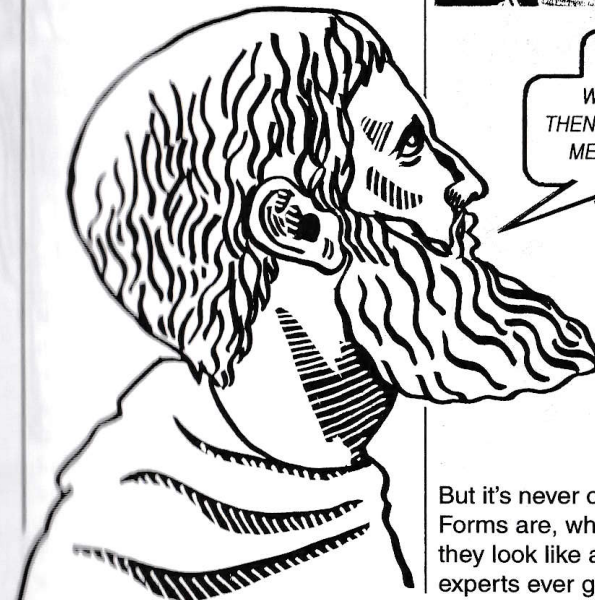


Similarly, someone who has been trained in mental skills like mathematics will finally realize that there is a better and more real world of Forms beyond everyday experience. Such individuals will finally see and know "Goodness itself" and become the infallible "golden" rulers of a society made up of indoctrinated silver, bronze and iron people who never question the system. In this Republic, if anyone wanted to know what to do, they'd just ask a "Guardian".

In his later works, Plato seems to have had some doubts about the Forms and how they relate to everyday objects in the world, or "particulars". Plato's system is "closed". If you accept what he says about knowledge, then you presumably have to accept his dictatorial moral and political views. Plato seems to have thought that all knowledge can be as permanent and disembodied as mathematics – which it can't. He also probably became "bewitched" by the strange quirkiness of ancient Greek which insinuates that if you "know" anything, you have to experience it directly.



IF YOU KNOW WHAT "BEAUTY" IS, THEN IT IS AS IF YOU HAVE MET IT FACE TO FACE AS A FORM.



But it's never clear what the Forms are, where they exist, what they look like and why only a few experts ever get to "see" them.

PHILOSOPHICAL EXPERTS

Plato's philosophy encouraged later generations of philosophers to believe it was their job to discover special kinds of mystical or "ideal" knowledge lying below the surface of the everyday. His political philosophy is also a potentially dangerous encouragement to create a "utopia" ruled by a "superior" and authoritarian élite. We know where experiments of that kind can lead.

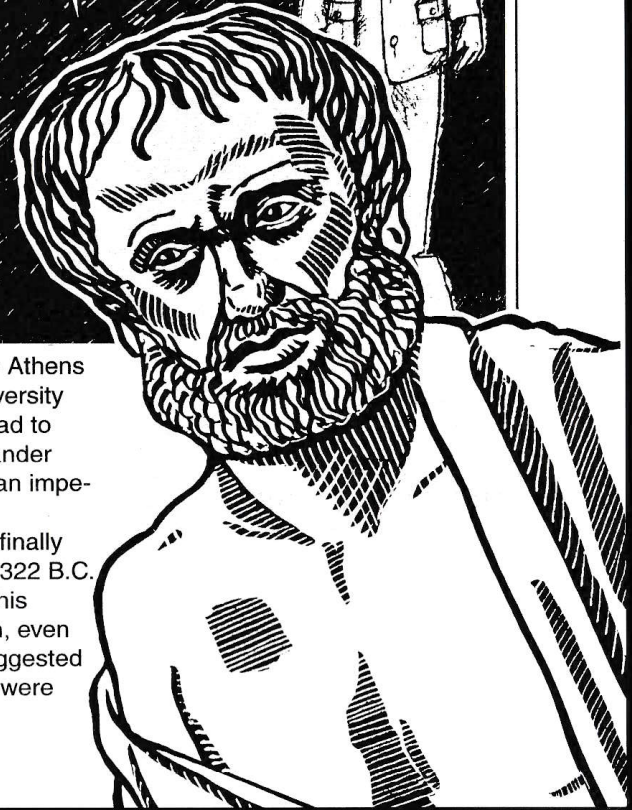


ARISTOTLE THE TEACHER

When he was eighteen, **Aristotle** (384-322 B.C.) came down to Athens from Macedonia in northern Greece to study in Plato's Academy. He obviously liked being a student there, because he stayed for twenty years. When Plato died, Aristotle left Athens, got married and returned home to Macedonia.



Eventually he returned to Athens and founded his own university called the **Lyceum**. He had to leave Athens when Alexander died, because Macedonian imperialists suddenly became extremely unpopular. He finally died in exile in Euboa in 322 B.C. In his will, he asked that his slaves be made free men, even though he had earlier suggested that such captive people were slaves "by nature".

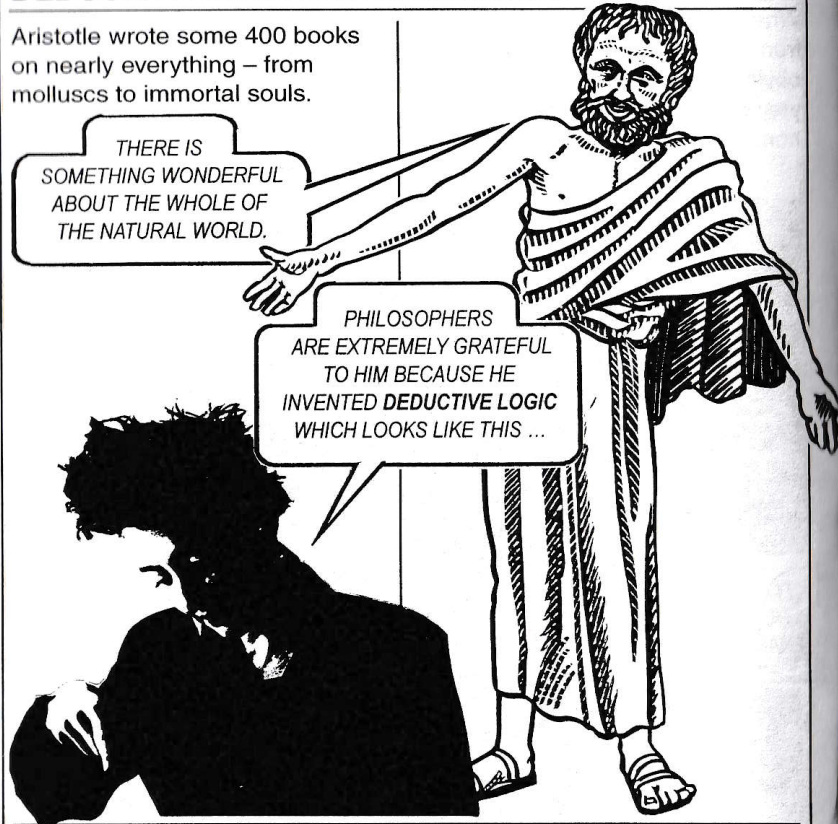


DEDUCTIVE OR SYLLOGISTIC LOGIC

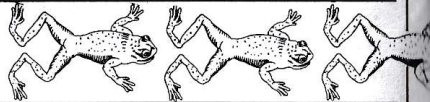
Aristotle wrote some 400 books on nearly everything – from molluscs to immortal souls.

THERE IS SOMETHING WONDERFUL ABOUT THE WHOLE OF THE NATURAL WORLD.

PHILOSOPHERS ARE EXTREMELY GRATEFUL TO HIM BECAUSE HE INVENTED DEDUCTIVE LOGIC WHICH LOOKS LIKE THIS ...



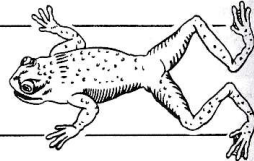
All frogs can swim (Premise)



This is a frog (Premise)



Therefore it can swim (Conclusion)



Similar logical structures or **syllogisms** can be produced with "No frogs" and "Some frogs". And if your argument follows some simple rules (like not allowing more in the conclusion than the premises), then it will be valid. And if the premises are true, and your argument is valid, then the conclusion will be guaranteed.



THE FROG WILL BE ABLE TO SWIM, AND YOU WON'T HAVE TO THROW IT IN THE WATER TO FIND OUT.

Logic is a powerful tool, but Aristotle was never very clear about what exactly logic is telling you about – the world itself, the human mind or how language works.

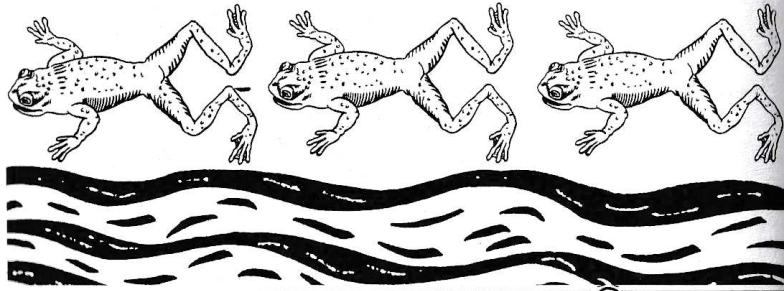
INDUCTION AND SCIENCE

Aristotle was not at all convinced by Plato's bizarre theory of Ideal Forms. He too believed that the world was made up of "forms", but these were only "natural kinds" or species. The scientist's job is to find out what all these "kinds" are, and to explore their properties. This is one reason why Aristotle also recognized the importance of **induction**. By observing particular swimming frogs we can make an informed guess that all frogs can swim.

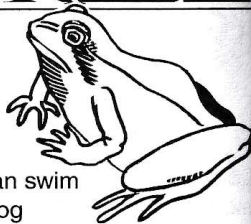


THESE FROGS CAN SWIM ...

THEREFORE ALL FROGS CAN SWIM.



By being able to generalize from specific frogs to the species, we can start to do science. We can use inductive generalizations about the species to deduce a conclusion about an individual frog, and this gives science the power of prediction.



All frogs can swim
This is a frog
Therefore he can swim

FINAL CAUSES

Aristotle thought that only *individual* things existed, not "Forms", and that everything had a "final cause" or potential function. So fire has the constant potential to move upward and heavy objects to fall downward. Other things like plants, animals and human beings have much more complex functions.



AND BECAUSE EVERY THING AND EVENT HAS A CAUSE, IF THEY ARE ALL TRACED BACK TO THE BEGINNING OF TIME, THEN THERE MUST BE ONE FIRST CAUSE OR "PRIME MOVER" ...

This circular and rather empty account of why things behave as they do is called a **Teleological** explanation. It's as if "cause" is a mysterious internal "puller" or ultimate purpose, not an external separate "pusher". Modern philosophers and scientists are less confident about predicting what the final purpose of everything is. Thanks to Darwinian evolutionary beliefs, they even doubt whether such a thing exists.

SOMETHING VERY CLOSE TO A DIVINE CREATOR.



SOULS AND SUBSTANCES

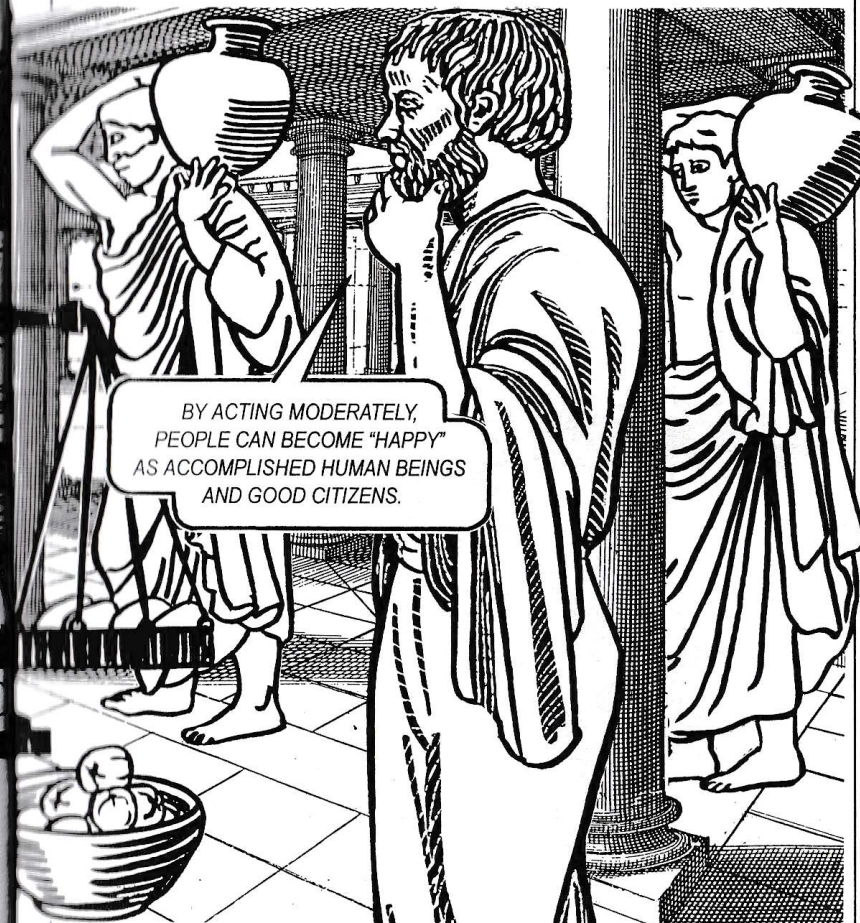
Aristotle also had a go at the One Big Question. He didn't accept that material objects were just inferior copies of eternal "Forms". For Aristotle, everything is made of unique "substances" which have "essential" or "accidental" properties. Essential properties *define* something.



This philosophical problem of "substance" continued to trouble philosophers for the next 2,500 years. Aristotle also said that souls are the principle of all biological life. Plants have a vegetative soul which makes them grow, animals have another that gives them sensations and humans have both, with the added bonus of reason. Unlike Pythagorean and Platonic souls though, the Aristotelian one offers no guarantee of immortality.

THE ETHICS OF MODERATION

Plato thought morality should be left to infallible experts. Aristotle thought morality was more like a practical everyday sort of skill that most adults acquire from experience. Parents train their offspring to be moral in their behaviour towards other children and adults then learn how to be sensible and moderate in their dealings with others. Human beings are social animals, programmed to live together harmoniously, even if their moral "software" needs to be exercised regularly by choosing the "Mean" between extremes.



So Aristotelian ethics is more about self-fulfilment than morality as such. 33

TAKING THE BLAME

Aristotle thought Socrates was wrong to believe that "Virtue is knowledge".



Aristotle's ethics may seem dull and obvious but his "virtue theory" could be right. Perhaps ethics should be about producing people who are morally experienced, rather than about inventing "pure" moral systems or rules. But do human beings have these moral "virtues" or functions? Our function might be to act as ruthless individualists.

PLATONIST DREAMERS AND ARISTOTELIAN REALISTS

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle got Western philosophy firmly established. The philosopher **A.N. Whitehead** (1861-1947) famously suggested that all of Western philosophy ultimately consists of no more than "footnotes" to Plato. Plato did ask all the right questions for which philosophers are still seeking answers. It is also commonly suggested that, ever since, philosophers have had either of two tendencies.

