GREEK PHILOSOPHY

SOCRATES http://classics.mit.edu/Browse/browse-Plato.html

Socrates was the first of the three great Greek philosophers (the other two are Plato and Aristotle). Socrates spent a lot of time going around Athens asking people he met these questions, "What is wisdom?" "What is beauty?" and so forth. Sometimes the people just said they were busy, but sometimes they would try to answer him. Then Socrates would try to teach them to think better by asking them more questions, which showed them the problems in their logic. Often this made people angry. Sometimes they even tried to beat him up. His questioning style is known as the "Socratic Method".
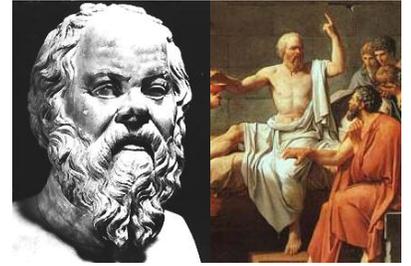
Although Socrates is probably the most well-known and most important philosopher, he wrote nothing down. What we know of his discussions and ideas comes from the writings of his student, Plato.

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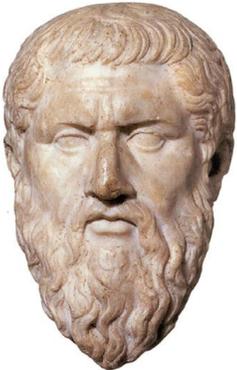
When Plato was a young man, he went to listen to Socrates, and learned a lot from Socrates about how to think, and what sort of questions to think about. When Socrates was killed in 399 BC, Plato was very upset (he was 30 years old when Socrates died). Plato began to write down some of the conversations he had heard Socrates have. Practically everything we know about Socrates comes from what Plato wrote down.

"ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE" (FROM PLATO'S REPUBLIC)

Plato thought a lot about the natural world and how it works. One of the ways Plato tried to explain one of his ideas was with the famous allegory (metaphor) of the cave.

Suppose there is a cave, and inside the cave there are some men chained up to a wall, so that they can only see the back wall of the cave and nothing else.

These men can't see anything outside of the cave, or even see each other clearly, but they can see shadows of items in the firelight.

Wouldn't these prisoners come to think that the shadows were real, and that was what things really looked like?

Plato's Cave

"ALLEGORY OF THE RING" (FROM PLATO'S REPUBLIC)

Socrates enters into a conversation with a man named Glaucon about government and justice (laws and rules). Glaucon argues that justice (law) was invented because people are afraid of being hurt more than they fear hurting others. So, to keep from being hurt, people make an agreement not to hurt each other (in other words, they form a social contract).

Glaucon tells a story to explain that people only do good things because they are afraid of being caught for doing bad things:

A man named Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia. One day, there was a great storm, and an earthquake made an opening in the earth at the place where he was feeding his flock.

Amazed at the sight, he went down into the opening, where, among other amazing things, he saw a hollow bronze horse with doors. Looking inside the horse, the shepherd saw a very large dead body. It looked to the shepherd to be more than human. The body had nothing on but a gold ring. He took the ring from the finger of the dead man and climbed up out of the hole in the ground.

Now all the shepherds met together, according to their custom, so they might send their monthly report about the flocks of sheep to their king. Gyges joined the other shepherds having the ring on his finger; and, as he was sitting with them, he twisted the ring on his finger, and instantly he became invisible to the rest of the shepherds.

The other shepherds began talking about him as if he were no longer with them. He was astonished at this. He again twisted the ring around his finger and reappeared. He tested the ring over and over, and always found the same result. Whenever he twisted the ring so that the collet (the thick, decorated part of the ring) was facing inward, he became invisible. When he twisted the ring so that the collet faced outwards, he reappeared.

This gave him an idea. He used his invisibility to gain entrance to the palace of the king and queen. Once inside, he seduced the queen, making her fall in love with him. And, with her help, he plotted against the king and killed him, taking over the kingdom.

Suppose now that there were two such magic rings, and a just man (someone who does what is right) put on one of them and an unjust man (someone who does what is best for himself, not caring about others) put on the other ring. It's human nature for both men to act the same. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and sleep with any one he wanted, or kill or release from prison anyone he chose. Someone with such power would be like a god among men. In this situation, a good man and a bad man would both come at last to the same point. They both would do the wrong thing because they could get away with it.

This proves that people are just (good), not because they want to be, but because they are afraid of being caught. Whenever a person thinks he can be unjust (bad) without being caught, he will, because all people believe in their hearts that being bad is far more profitable than being good. Can you imagine anyone finding this power of becoming invisible, and never doing any wrong? The temptation would be too great. And besides, anyone who has such a great opportunity to do whatever his heart desires without having to worry about the consequences, and does not take the opportunity, would be thought of as a great fool. Publicly, he might be praised for being such a good man, but privately, everyone would think that he is a fool for letting a great opportunity pass him by.

What do you think? → ***Ethics***

Socrates thinks about this dilemma and tells Glaucon to look at the larger picture to figure out what justice really is. Socrates believes that justice is good not only for its results (keeping people safe) but for its own sake (doing the right thing is best no matter what is gained from it). Being a just man may not have immediate satisfaction, but will have better results in the long-run. Therefore, it is better to be just (good) than unjust (bad).

ARISTOTLE   http://classics.mit.edu/Browse/browse-Aristotle.html
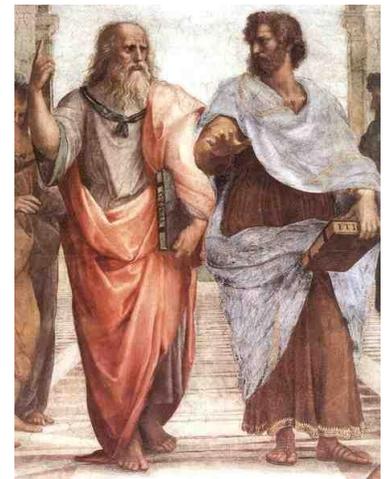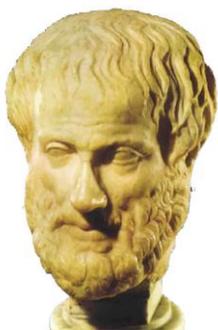
When Aristotle was a young man, about 350 BC, he went to study at Plato's Academy. Soon afterwards, Aristotle left Athens and went to Macedon to be the tutor of the young prince Alexander, who grew up to be Alexander the Great. As far as we can tell, Alexander was not at all interested in learning anything from Aristotle, but they did become friends.

Aristotle was more interested in science than Socrates or Plato. He wanted to use Socrates' logical methods to figure out how the real world worked; therefore Aristotle is really the father of today's scientific method. Aristotle was especially interested in biology, in classifying plants and animals in a way that would make sense. This is part of the Greek impulse to make order out of chaos: to take the chaotic natural world and impose a man-made order on it. When Alexander was traveling all over Western Asia, he had his messengers bring strange plants back to Aristotle for his studies. Aristotle also made efforts to create order in peoples' governments. He created a classification system of monarchies, oligarchies, tyrannies, democracies and republics which we still use today. ***Reason*** (logic) = clear, ordered thinking