The Big Three: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle

I. Socrates

After the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian Wars, many people in Athens began to question their values. One such person who was already questioning people’s values was Socrates. Socrates’ philosophy can be summed up as follows:

1.) He wanted people to examine their most closely held beliefs. Socrates said “the unexamined life is not worth living.”
2.) He believed there were universal standards for concepts like “truth,” “justice,” and “good.”
3.) In order to get people to rethink what they believed, he developed the Socratic Method, a type of question and answer approach that exposed the flaws in peoples’ thinking.
4.) Socrates didn’t claim to know any answers, he always said “I only know that I know nothing.”

Example of the Socratic Method:

Socrates: “What is the best type of government?”
Student: “The best type of government is one where people have a say in how it is run and the laws that are written.”
Socrates: “What if the majority of the people are sexist and racist?”
Student: “Well, then only those who are not sexist and racist should have a say.”
Socrates: “And how do we determine who those are?”

and so on….

Socrates might also use a “thought experiment” to expose the flaws in people’s beliefs. For example, Socrates might pose to you the following scenario:

Socrates: “A runaway train is approaching a group of five construction workers on the track ahead. Suppose you were standing next to railroad tracks, and there was a switch that would allow you to divert the train onto another set of tracks where there was only one construction worker standing [scenario A]. Is it just to save five men by killing one?
Student: “Yes, I suppose it is. Killing one man to save five is the only choice, justice is ‘that which does the least amount of harm to society’”
Socrates: “Ok, now suppose you are standing on a bridge over the tracks. There is no switch. However, there is a man standing next to you. If you shove that man onto the tracks, he will die, but he will stop the train [scenario B]. Do you shove the man onto the tracks? Is that just?”

At the end of his life, Socrates was accused of “corrupting the youth of Athens.” He was forced to drink hemlock, a poison, and died. He never wrote anything down; all we know of Socrates’ beliefs are from his students. Socrates most important contribution is that we should always question those in power as well as ourselves.
II. Plato

Plato was a student of Socrates and wrote down many of his teachings. Here’s what you need to know about Plato:

1.) Most famous work was called The Republic

2.) In it, he outlined his vision of a perfect society. In it, there would be three social classes:

A.) On top would be philosopher-kings. Since they love knowledge and truth above all, they would rule the state most wisely. While we may disagree with having kings rule, the idea that those in charge should be educated and not just there for power is an idea of Plato’s.

“Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never rest from their evils, no, nor the human race.”

PLATO, The Republic

B.) Beneath them would be soldiers. They love courage, honor, and their homeland, so they would defend the state.

C.) At the bottom would be farmers and craftsmen. They would produce everything that the state needs.

He also thought the “perfect man” would divide his soul in a similar manner.

3.) Plato did not trust democracy. He thought it was “mob rule,” and that the uneducated masses should not be given so much power. Part of his distrust came from the fact that his teacher, Socrates, was sentenced to death by a democracy.

One of the most famous parts of The Republic is known as the Allegory of the Cave. In it, Plato compares our existence to prisoners being chained inside of a cave. We watch shadows cast on the wall, thinking they are reality. But the truth is they are shadows cast by puppeteers behind us. We don’t know that we are prisoners. Plato described a philosopher as someone who realized they were a prisoner and escaped the cave to the sunlight, which is reality. He said a philosopher would try and return into the cave to teach the prisoners the truth. However, the prisoners were so convinced of their false beliefs that they would attack and even kill the philosopher. That is why he was distrustful of democracy.
Plato also meant to use the allegory as a way to teach us that we cannot use our senses to realize the truth. We have to turn inwards and use our mind.

III. Aristotle

Aristotle was a student of Plato, but he disagreed with Plato’s view of reality. Aristotle believed that we could use our senses to discover truths about the world around us. Some people even consider Aristotle the first scientist, and he developed a system for logic that is similar to the scientific method.

Perhaps most importantly, Aristotle outlined the idea of the rule of law. What he meant was that everyone, even a ruler, should be subject to the law. It also meant that laws should promote the greatest good. While this is a common idea in our time, it was not common in his. This idea had a big influence on later democracies.

And the rule of law, it is argued, is preferable to that of any individual. On the same principle, even if it be better for certain individuals to govern, they should be made only guardians and ministers of the law.

For he who trusts any man with supreme power gives it to a wild beast, for such his appetite sometimes makes him: passion influences those in power, even the best of men, but law is reason without desire. . . .”

-ARISTOTLE, Politics
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