An Overview of Greek Philosophy

The history of Greek philosophy can be divided into four phases. It begins with an inquiry into objective world and shows an obvious trend to an abstract mode of thought. The first phase is named as time of nature philosophy, or pre-Sophistic period, which extends from about 585 BC to the middle of the fifth century BC. In this period of time, philosophers mainly focused on two big problems. The first one is the problem of substance. What, they ask, is the substance, or substances, by which all objects are composed of? Answers range from concrete substances like water, air and fire, to some more abstract concepts like the *Infinite*,numbers and atoms. The second problem is about change: What is the nature of the process by which one object change into another? Some believe that change is impossible. The changes we observe are fake. Some believe that everything is in a stage of ceaseless change and things seem to be permanent because they reach a balance between loss and gain. Others try to intermingle such two opposite opinions and explain the phenomenon of change by the movement and rearrangement of something unchangeable.

The second phase is known as the time of Sophists, which belongs to the fifth century BC. The investigations to the external world and attempts to construct a theory by which all things can be explained stop temporarily now. Philosophers devote their attention to ourselves, to human knowledge and conduct. Whether human mind are qualified to solve the big problems that was proposed in the last phase is doubted and traditional views are not accepted as they used to be. This leads to a growth of skepticism, and shows a tendency of degenerating into subjectivism and relativism. When it comes to the most intelligent scholar of this time, Socrates is honoured by his contribution in defending knowledge against skepticism and showing how truth may be reached by a logical method.

The third phase is the systemic period. It belongs to Plato and Aristotle, two greatest philosophers of antiquity, and is characterized by a concern of all problems of philosophy. They are model of independent thinking, reflecting and criticizing.

The last period, which extends from 320 BC to 529 AD, is known as the time of religion and ethics. It is religious as shown by the rise of theological movement in Alexandria. In the most developed form of Neoplatonism, it seeks to explain the world as an emanation from a transcendent God who is both the source and goal of all being. It is ethical as shown by the investigation to the final aim of rational human endeavors. Some believe the answer is pleasure, because such knowledge would help destroy superstitions and increase happiness. Others believe the answer is virtue, because such knowledge teaches one his duty as a part of the rational universe.