

AUTHOR STEPHEN WEST

# PHILOSOPHIZE THIS BOOK!

FROM IONIA · TO · ANTIQUITY



This book is dedicated to the three things I cherish most in this world:

A cat that genuinely doesn't try to change me, a bear I saw in the woods almost 10 years ago that I can only assume is living a better life today, and the countless people that are brave enough to know more today than they did yesterday.

## Introduction

For the first few years I read philosophy, my favorite philosopher to pretend was my favorite philosopher was Bertrand Russell. He had everything you could ask for in a philosopher. He was witty. He was kind. He had hair that would embarrass Willy Wonka himself. So in the 1940's, this guy thought it would be a good idea to sit down and write a book attempting to concisely outline the entire history of western philosophy. Little known fact: it took him years of agonizing over the title of his book to finally arrive at something creative enough to publish. He called it *A History of Western Philosophy*.

At least that somewhat explains the hair.

Anyway, I've read this book close to a dozen times, and I've always considered it a masterpiece—an intellectual feat that would be a waste of time for mere mortals to even dare to attempt to match the brilliance of. Other people weren't so impressed. They rightfully point out Bertrand Russell's repeated personal biases toward certain thinkers. They rightfully point to the sporadic factual errors or his cursory overviews of certain people that ruin the integrity of the book. Most of all, they say it's just downright irresponsible to consider the book "a history of western philosophy" because opinion and history should always be separate, in the same way the newspaper separates the news from the editorial section.

One particularly miserable person left this one-star review:

**"This book is perfunctory and extremely shallow. Russell's reductive reading of the tradition shows little insight. However, it is amusing at times, hence the star."**

Initially, I felt personally attacked. I couldn't believe it! The book I exalted in my head as the greatest history of western philosophy ever compiled, executed by a man who could have an anvil fall on his head and make my writing look like a seventh-grade creative writing essay... this history of philosophy was still not good enough for these people?

But then, like practically everything else in my entire life I've ever had thoughts on, I realized that my first inclination was naive and pathetic.

Consider this for a second: when you type “history of philosophy” into the Amazon search bar, there are 200,000 books that match your search. Every single one of those books is flawed, biased, and contains factual errors in some capacity.

The history of philosophy isn't something that should be relegated to a single book. It's not that Bertrand Russell is an idiot; the task itself is impossible. Think about it: even if you eat tree bark, run two miles a day, and manage to avoid every city bus and meteor that comes close enough to kill you, you still only have eighty years on this planet. That's the nature of our human existence—we are finite creatures. We just don't have enough time to become experts in every field; it's impossible!

If I set out to write this book with the goal of writing a comprehensive, unbiased overview of western philosophy, this entire process would be yet another checkmark in the victory column for my dad, who swore to me I would fail at everything I ever tried to do.

Just kidding, he never actually said that explicitly.

I want to make clear what this book is and what this book is not. This book is not pretending to be a completely unbiased account of western philosophy, although I have gone to great lengths to research each element fully and leave out things that seem to be based only on conjecture or single sources.

This book is not pretending to be a comprehensive overview of philosophy, although if you absorb the information in this book you will have a better understanding of philosophy than 99.9% of people living today.

The goal of this book is the same goal that I apply to each day I live my life—to try to get people thinking about why they think and act the way they do. I am not intending to sound professorial throughout the book; I am not telling you that you need to think the same way I do about everything. In fact, it is quite the opposite. I want you to disagree with me. I want you to

ruthlessly tear my beliefs apart, because whenever I do ten reps of that ruthless tearing motion, I always learn something incredible about myself.

To put it shortly: this book is going to be weird. It isn't as well-organized or structured as many books that try to do similar things. But in a way, the shoe fits, because neither am I. Just a quick background on why I got into philosophy: when I was sixteen years old, I didn't have any positive role models—at least not ones that could be direct personal mentors.

I'm not exactly sure why, but I recognized very early on just how easy it was to fall into destructive, closed-minded patterns of thinking for the sake of convenience. Maybe it was because I saw it all around me, but it seemed like almost every adult I met had some sort of oversimplified lens they viewed the world through in order to make sense of it all.

Aristotle once said, “Humans by nature desire to know.”

I think a more accurate statement would be, “Humans by nature desire to believe they know.”

The world is a crazy place. It's filled with uncertainty and doubt and fear, and I think people feel that the only way they can contend with the unbridled, horrific ambiguity of it all is to simplify it down into terms they can easily understand and reinforce.

*“It’s the black people that are ruining the world.”*

*“It’s the damn conservatives that are ruining the world.”*

*“It’s two groups: middle-easterners and Red Sox fans!”*

Some part of me intuitively knew that it couldn't be this easy. I remember it like it was yesterday:

**“If removing this one group or way of thinking would solve all of the world’s problems, then why aren’t people living in a utopia where these variables don’t exist? Asia was far from paradise before they knew black people existed. There are pockets of counties and cities where you’d be hard pressed to find a single conservative voter, and I’m pretty sure Red Sox fans never even leave their houses. Where is the Garden of Eden that these people are expecting?”**

If there is one piece of advice I can give you, it's to be the one person in a million that actually takes advice. If there's one thing I thank the universe for every day of my life, it's that I was smart enough to know how stupid I was when I was sixteen years old. That's not me being self-deprecating; I have news for you—you were stupid when you were sixteen too! We were all stupid when we were sixteen. I just looked around me and saw how miserable these oversimplified ways of viewing the world made people, and to me there was only one question worth asking: how do I make sure this never happens to me?

I'd always been a reader, and at the time I was making the rounds of the typical BS self-help books filled with the same warmed-over truisms marketed toward lost grown-up children. But one cliché really stuck out to me at the time:

**“You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with.”**

That's it! I needed to spend time with people I wanted to be more like. I needed to spend time with happy, successful people, and then it would only be a matter of time before they started to rub off on me! I was such a dumb kid, I actually asked the question, “Who's the wisest person in town?” Let me call that guy and see if he wants to hang out!

But before my stubby little fingers could start flipping to the “wisdom” section of the yellow pages, I got an even better idea. Why stop there? Why not reach out to the wisest guy or girl in the whole state? Why not the whole world?

Then I had a thought that would change the course of my entire life.

How incredible it would be to have the wisest person in the history of the world as a mentor. Talk about a fool-proof plan! No matter how comically stupid you are—you could be dumber than most farm animals—eventually this guy would have to rub off on you at least a little bit, right?

I had to find this person. For fifteen seconds, it was my life's mission. It didn't matter if they were dead or alive, they had to at least have written books. When I imagined the person who held the title of “the wisest person in the history of the world,” I pictured harems of women, awards and certificates hanging on the walls, and bookshelves from floor to ceiling filled

with leather-bound wisdom books (my term at the time for books filled with wisdom).

Of course I would prefer it if they were still alive. I could hop on the next plane flight to where they were and be Confucius by the time I got my next haircut. But even if they were dead, I still had a plan.

I would read one of their books. What are books, really, other than just a snapshot of one person's thoughts during a particular point in their intellectual development? That was good enough for me. Peering into the text-catalogued mind of the wisest person in the history of the world had to be worth something. It had to be as good as hanging out with them for at least a couple days. But where does one begin on their quest to find the wisest person in the history of the world?

Well, I did what any self-respecting sixteen-year-old kid would do when looking for the wisest man in the world; I googled “wisest person in the history of the world”.

There are moments in life that are pivotal; this was one of those moments for me. Sometimes I wonder how different I might be today if the search results had turned out differently. Sometimes I wonder how different my thoughts might be on every single issue if some random guy at Google had made even the most microscopic of changes when creating the search algorithm.

The first result that came up for me was a blog entry that was making a case for why some guy named Socrates was the wisest man in the history of the world.

I knew so little about this guy at the time that I mistakenly referred to him as “So-Crates” for the first couple days until somebody laughed at me, thinking I was joking around. Nope, not joking. Just pathetic.

Anyway, in retrospect there probably wasn't a better figure from the history of philosophy for me to run across. As I said before, I wanted somebody to show me the error of my ways. I wanted someone to show me how I should be thinking about things to prevent myself from getting caught on one of these treadmills of oversimplified thinking. I soon found out that Socrates was a philosopher from ancient Athens that dedicated his entire life to the task of helping people do exactly this.

I read the blog from the search results. Then I read it again. After about the fifth time reading it, I remember having mixed feelings about Socrates. In fact, he kind of sounded like he was simultaneously the most awesome and most annoying person I had ever heard of. From what the blog said, this guy walked around in a crowded marketplace every day and decided to make it his personal quest to sarcastically feign complete ignorance about a random topic and beg some otherwise innocent person to explain it to him.

The unlucky victim, who ten seconds before was just trying to do their weekly shopping in peace, is then systematically broken down to the core of their being. Socrates would question things that seemed completely obvious —so obvious they were practically self-evident. Things like, “What is justice?” When the victim answered under the assumption that they knew exactly what justice was, Socrates would ask him a series of questions with the aim of showing them just how much they *didn't* know about it.

Socrates harassed people so much and was so good at this line of questioning that he became widely known for this style of conversation. I'm filled with a weird feeling of nostalgia as I write this because the following passage is the first example of “Socratic Dialogue” that I ever read. It's an excerpt from a work titled *Gorgias* wherein Socrates is trying to get to the bottom of what exactly it means to be a rhetorician.

**Socrates:** I see, from the few words which Polus has uttered, that he has attended more to the art which is called rhetoric than to dialectic.

**Polus:** What makes you say so, Socrates?

**Socrates:** Because, Polus, when Chaerephon asked you what was the art which Gorgias knows, you praised it as if you were answering some one who found fault with it, but you never said what the art was.

**Polus:** Why, did I not say that it was the noblest of arts?

**Socrates:** Yes, indeed, but that was no answer to the question: nobody asked what was the quality, but what was the nature, of the art, and by what name we were to describe Gorgias. And I would still beg you briefly and clearly, as you answered Chaerephon when he asked you at first, to say what this art is, and what we ought to call Gorgias: Or

rather, Gorgias, let me turn to you, and ask the same question, what are we to call you, and what is the art which you profess?

*Gorgias: Rhetoric, Socrates, is my art.*

*Socrates: Then I am to call you a rhetorician?*

*Gorgias: Yes, Socrates, and a good one too, if you would call me that which, in Homeric language, "I boast myself to be."*

*Socrates: I should wish to do so.*

*Gorgias: Then pray do.*

*Socrates: And are we to say that you are able to make other men rhetoricians?*

*Gorgias: Yes, that is exactly what I profess to make them, not only at Athens, but in all places.*

*Socrates: And will you continue to ask and answer questions, Gorgias, as we are at present doing and reserve for another occasion the longer mode of speech which Polus was attempting? Will you keep your promise, and answer shortly the questions which are asked of you?*

*Gorgias: Some answers, Socrates, are of necessity longer; but I will do my best to make them as short as possible; for a part of my profession is that I can be as short as any one.*

*Socrates: That is what is wanted, Gorgias; exhibit the shorter method now, and the longer one at some other time.*

*Gorgias: Well, I will; and you will certainly say, that you never heard a man use fewer words.*

*Socrates: Very good then; as you profess to be a rhetorician, and a maker of rhetoricians, let me ask you, with what is rhetoric concerned: I might ask with what is weaving concerned, and you would reply (would you not?), with the making of garments?*

*Gorgias: Yes.*

*Socrates: And music is concerned with the composition of melodies?*

*Gorgias: It is.*

*Socrates: By Here, Gorgias, I admire the surpassing brevity of your answers.*

*Gorgias: Yes, Socrates, I do think myself good at that.*

*Socrates: I am glad to hear it; answer me in like manner about rhetoric: with what is rhetoric concerned?*

*Gorgias: With discourse.*

*Socrates: What sort of discourse, Gorgias--such discourse as would teach the sick under what treatment they might get well?*

*Gorgias: No.*

*Socrates: Then rhetoric does not treat of all kinds of discourse?*

*Gorgias: Certainly not.*

*Socrates: And yet rhetoric makes men able to speak?*

*Gorgias: Yes.*

*Socrates: And to understand that about which they speak?*

*Gorgias: Of course. . . .*

*Socrates: Come, then, and let us see what we really mean about rhetoric; for I do not know what my own meaning is as yet. When the assembly meets to elect a physician or a shipwright or any other craftsman, will the rhetorician be taken into counsel? Surely not. For at every election he ought to be chosen who is most skilled; and, again, when walls have to be built or harbours or docks to be constructed, not the rhetorician but the master workman will advise; or when generals*

**have to be chosen and an order of battle arranged, or a proposition taken, then the military will advise and not the rhetoricians: what do you say, Gorgias? Since you profess to be a rhetorician and a maker of rhetoricians, I cannot do better than learn the nature of your art from you. And here let me assure you that I have your interest in view as well as my own. For likely enough some one or other of the young men present might desire to become your pupil, and in fact I see some, and a good many too, who have this wish, but they would be too modest to question you. And therefore when you are interrogated by me, I would have you imagine that you are interrogated by them. "What is the use of coming to you, Gorgias?" they will say. "About what will you teach us to advise the state?--about the just and unjust only, or about those other things also which Socrates has just mentioned?" How will you answer them?**

*Gorgias: I like your way of leading us on, Socrates, and I will endeavour to reveal to you the whole nature of rhetoric.*

Reading this as a sixteen-year-old kid in search of a mentor, I couldn't help but ask, "How awesome is this guy?" In that passage he is talking to Gorgias, a self-proclaimed expert of rhetoric. If someone claims to be an expert in a certain field, it seems pretty reasonable to expect them to at least know what they are an expert in. But just by asking a few questions, Socrates not only shows that Gorgias may not be as masterful at rhetoric as he initially thought, but that he might not even be entirely sure of what rhetoric is at all. This is exactly what I needed! I realized that I was young and dumb. I had "strong convictions." I had so-called "firm beliefs." I needed someone like Socrates to ask me a series of questions about everything that I firmly believed to show me how pliant my beliefs actually were.

Even being as young as I was, one area I was confident of my ignorance in was particle physics, so there was no chance of me constructing a makeshift time machine in my closet to go back in time and get grilled by Socrates. No chance. I'd have to settle for second best. If I read his vast collection of dialogues and studied how Socrates broke down the oversimplified views of others, it would be easy for me not to fall into the same traps these people did. But I ran into an immediate road block that froze me in my tracks faster than the first time I heard "Friday" by Rebecca Black.

Where was Socrates' anthology of work? Where were the shelves with leather-bound books full of his wisdom? They were nowhere to be found. I checked the library, I checked the encyclopedia—I even checked Ask Jeeves! \*desperation\*

It turns out that the same personality that made Socrates the type of guy who wore a table cloth, never showered, and spent his days harassing people in the public square, also made him the type of person who didn't see much value in writing down his thoughts. He never wrote a single word in his entire life. I was crestfallen.

But I wasn't going to be stopped there. I would read the works of people influenced by Socrates and call them mentors. And then I'd read the people *they* influenced and call them mentors. I'd continue this process until I got to Kanye West, and then I would quietly set my book down on the table and find something else to spend my time on. Maybe these people wouldn't be who this random blogger named the "wisest man ever," but they certainly had to be better than anyone I could possibly find in my everyday life of bagging groceries and attending community college.

It was due to a lack of guidance that I sought guidance from philosophy. These people taught me how to remove the chains from my mind. These people taught me how to think. I've tried a lot of different things to be happy in this world, but nothing has ever made me happier than finding a way to serve others. This is the reason I started the Philosophize This! podcast—to give for free to others what I consider to be priceless.

My quest for becoming a better person was not met without resistance. At first it seemed like everyone around me thought I was an idiot. I have faced hundreds of people who have told me that I would be much better served trying to befriend some nice old man at down at Shady Acres retirement home—at least that guy is real. After all, what does some weirdo in a toga know about life? What could I possibly learn about what it means to be a human in the twenty-first century by reading the work of people who lived hundreds or thousands of years ago?

To be fair, I was worried about this when I first started out too. However, I soon realized that although the specific daily toils I face are much different than those Socrates faced, both of us share an underlying human nature that is timeless. Whether you're chiseling your thoughts into a stone tablet or an

Android tablet, some questions remain the same:

1. Why am I here?
2. What is the best way to live life?
3. What do I want from life?
4. What should my priorities be?
5. Should emotions be managed, and how?
6. Do I have free will? Or is it an illusion?
7. What is the correct system of government?
8. Where do we fit in to the hierarchy of nature?

I just wrote eight questions and realized that I could sit here writing them for the rest of the day without hesitating. Here is what I am getting at:

I am frustrated because I have to wait in line at the DMV for too long.  
Socrates is frustrated because he can't find any clean drinking water.

Although the specific problems are different, they both address the same mental function that gets frustrated about something that is entirely out of our control. The fact that Socrates gave his thoughts on frustration two and a half millennia ago is irrelevant.

People were getting needlessly frustrated long before Socrates was born and will continue to get needlessly frustrated long after I die; the insights that bring us acceptance of things that are out of our control are timeless. Insights about the toils of human nature have nothing to do with togas or cardigans.

Without exception, every philosophical treatise I have ever read has taught me something about myself. No matter how scarce and fragmented the remaining work of a philosopher is, I have always found some pithy quote that is perfectly applicable to something modern—the politics of modern day, the people of modern day, the religions of modern day. This book is designed to not only educate people about the life and times of these great thinkers, but to show that the synapses firing in their brains centuries ago are not only still relevant, but have made it possible for our synapses to fire today at all.

Thousands of people have written chronological histories of philosophy, but for me, what often happens when I read them is the philosophers and ideas turn into a meaningless blur of names and terminology. My hope and lack of

prayer is that this book doesn't follow suit; that the powerful implications behind each idea reveal how they molded each succeeding generation and gave rise to the world that we live in today.

After reading so many different philosophers, I think it's only natural to try to find a way to categorize the first thousand years of philosophy. For a long time I failed miserably. You guys should've seen me. I was pathetic. I was using stuff like Magic 8 balls, boxes of crayons—I was even going to compare each of the early philosophers to their corresponding members of \*Nsync and The Backstreet Boys.

But luckily for me (and for the reader of this book hopeful of being excited about living after finishing it), I finally arrived at a comparison that I think does the process justice and which I will continually refer back to throughout the book.

And now for what might go down in the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest extended metaphor in the history of the written word: the chronology of early philosophy is very similar to the process of starting and maintaining a fire.

Fire doesn't just start out of nowhere; it takes a spark. And that spark doesn't just instantly erupt into roaring flames, unless you're throwing a cigarette out the window in Southern California. Barring that one exception, that spark takes work. We've all seen those survival shows on TV where they aim their flint towards the handful of tree shavings and dead leaves and they blow on it and only through dexterous care are they able to take a renegade ember and turn it into a sustainable flame. That visual is comparable to what early humans faced when trying to make intellectual progress.

We didn't always have the convenience of pursuing knowledge as we do now. Much about the origins of the human species is still up for debate, but what seems pretty clear by this point is that there was a long period of time, figuratively speaking, where we sat cold around a pile of leaves and struck our flint trying to get this fire of philosophy going.

The most popular theory in today's world, one that will no doubt be proven incorrect one day, is the Out-of-Africa theory. It seems like that is always how things go. We seem so certain that the atom is the smallest particle in the entire universe, until one day a courageous scientist finds a way to cut it

open and sees that there are actually tons of smaller particles inside of it . We seem so certain that the world is flat, until one day a courageous explorer gets on a boat in search of Native Americans to show us where all the gold is.

The story goes that between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago, what we now know as the human species primarily lived in the sub-Saharan plains of Africa. We would congregate in small clusters around caves or fire pits, places where we could enjoy a positional and strategic advantage against predators. It seems accurate to define these early humans as a nomadic band of social butterflies. We liked to move around, and when we weren't moving around we would sit around these fire pits and talk about stuff. It's interesting to think about, but although you and I will never know what was said in these fireside exchanges, this may be where the first philosophy took place.

Don't get me wrong, these people weren't laying out complete philosophical systems. But if philosophy at its root is centered around discourse, a dissatisfaction with the current narrative, and the use of reason to arrive at new ideas that change the way we see the world, then these men and women were unquestionably philosophers—albeit primitive ones.

I imagine they looked around them and couldn't help but feel like Disney princesses dreaming of a better life in a far away land. Think about it: they were living on the equator. They were constantly on the move in fear of predators. They were constantly in search of the most basic of necessities; somebody at one of these conversations around the fire pit had to have brought up the idea of looking for a better place to stay-- some place a little more fertile.

## Migratory Paths



So they went north. It wasn't long once they started traveling north that they found a more fertile, life-sustaining area. In fact, it was so fertile it became known as the Fertile Crescent. It's a crescent shaped section of land that stretches from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. It not only was the first rest stop on this early exodus of humans from the African Savannah, but it may be the most famous fork in the road in human history. We're all very familiar with exactly where it is; it's the plot of land that connects Africa to Europe.

These early humans had a very difficult decision on their hands. Do we stay here? Do we go left? Do we go right? Do we go back where we came from?

I would love to go back in time and speak to one of these people and frantically try to convey to them through grunts and pictures just how important this decision was going to be, not only for them, but for every subsequent generation of their DNA for a hundred thousand years.

I would love to ask the people settling in France why they decided to stop there. Why not walk a little bit further? I'd love to ask with a smile on my face whether they think any of these tribes surrounding them are ever going to give them trouble in the future.

I would love to talk to the people settling to the east and west of the Steppe region of Asia and ask them if they think that the lack of resources and general scarcity will ever cause the Steppe people to start to get a little desperate and hungry.

Just the decision of whether to go east or west at this fork in the road is enough to make me slowly succumb to madness. I would've had a nervous breakdown. I'm not even kidding. Picture me blankly staring at a rock like that fat kid from *The Butterfly Effect*. That would be my fate, but for the rest of humanity, once you decided to travel east or west, that was just the first of your worries! Now you have to decide exactly how far away you're going to settle down.

Think about what this must have been like for these people: you are hiking for miles a day into uncharted wilderness. Psychologically speaking, this ambiguity brings good news and bad news. On one hand, for all you know there could be an idealistic, magical oasis right over the next hill. On the other hand, for all you know there could be a river of rabid flaming raccoons

trying to eat you. You have no idea!

I honestly can't even fully wrap my brain around how courageous these people were. I'm scared of stopping for gas in a bad neighborhood; imagine what these early humans had to do. They willingly plowed head first into a world so dangerous and so hostile that it is comparable to the worst area of the worst neighborhood in all of modern society. Then, after they marched right through the streets of this terrible neighborhood with everybody looking at them like they were crazy, they decided to set up tents in the middle of the road—roasting marshmallows and telling people to stay off their property.

These people were insane! There is no other way to put it. But sometimes, insanity is the only catalyst for change. Maybe another interesting question to ask about the psychology of these early human settlers is why they chose to settle down in one area as opposed to another. Well, it needed to be based on something, and one of the patterns historians notice when looking at the areas these pockets of settlers chose is that they're almost always areas in which an abundance of natural resources was prevalent.

Along these immense paths that began in the fertile crescent and ended to the west in Europe and to the east in South America, there were geographic locations that favored the positive growth of a civilization more than others. They either possessed strategic advantages or resource advantages, and the thinking is that it's in these locations that the greatest numbers of people settled in hopes of living a less stressful lifestyle.

Here's the important part: this less stressful lifestyle is what allowed philosophy to exist at all. If you were in a plane crash and stranded out in thick woods with predators and dangerous weather all around you, you probably wouldn't spend much of your time thinking about what the essence of a rock is. You probably wouldn't care too much about the nature or the form of the jaguar that is about to disembowel you. Instead, you would probably spend your time setting up shelter, gathering firewood, and looking for food.

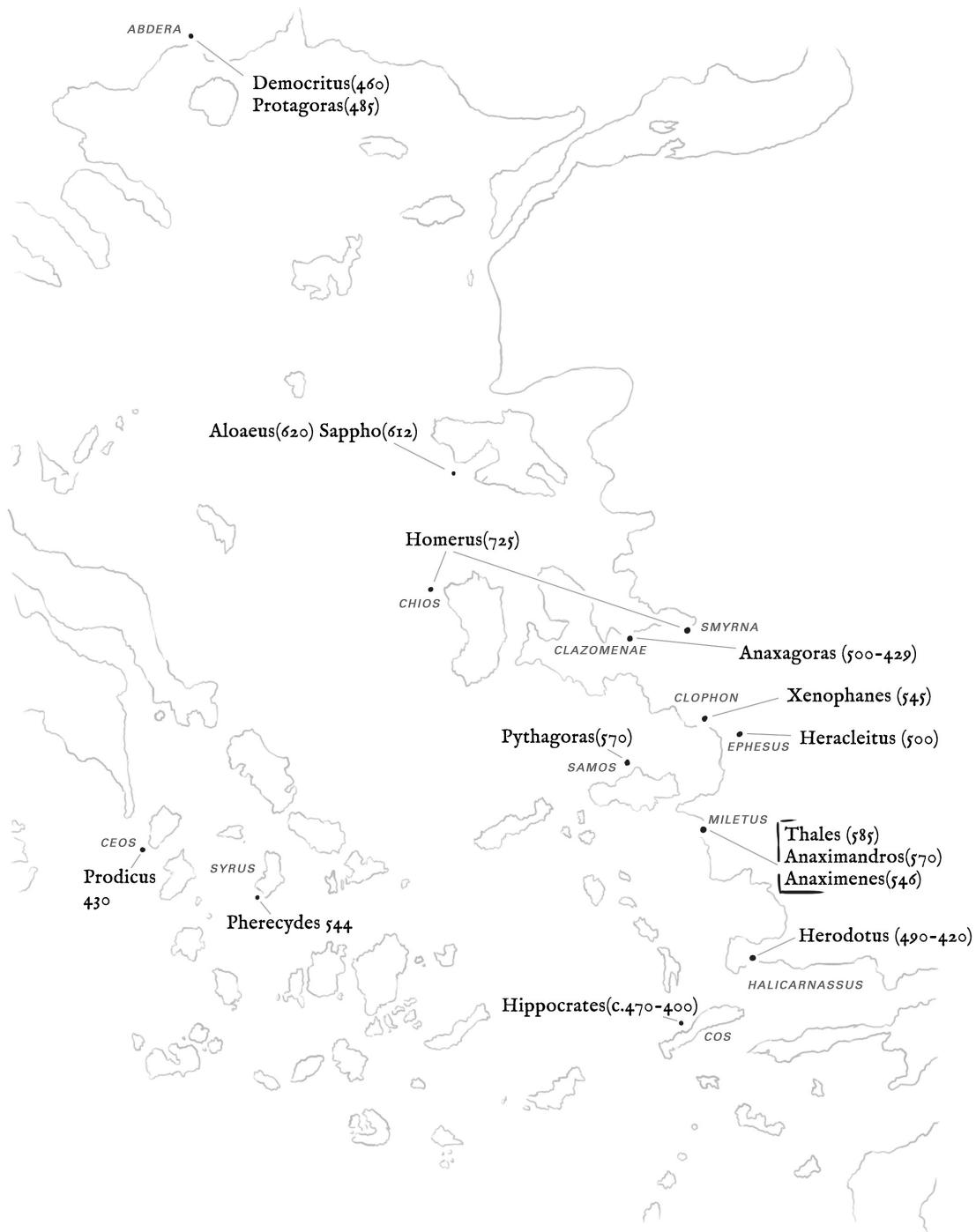
Based on the current historical narrative, the lives of humans up until around eight thousand years ago was about the same existence. When these groups of people settled near places with strategic advantages or an abundance of fresh water and food, they had much more free time available to spend

specializing in certain fields. An even smaller intellectually privileged group could think about why they were specializing in anything at all. Maybe this concept is best illustrated with an example. I've gotten more positive feedback from the very first example I gave in the first episode of *Philosophize This!* than I have from any other comparison or example I have given since, so I think it's worth including in this book.

When the first episode was released, *The Walking Dead* was airing its third season. There were two simultaneous storylines going on. One of them shows a group in a constant struggle contending with the lifestyle of existing in a zombie-infested, hostile world. At the helm of this group is Rick, the protagonist of the show. Rick and his multicultural band of survivors fight their way from safe house to safe house. Their life is chaos. There is no stability. They have no idea where their next meal is going to come from. They have no idea if there is a horde of zombies waiting for them just over the next hill. There is no time for philosophy. There's not even time for meaningful conversations of any type. Whenever someone lets their guard down long enough to convey a heartfelt story about their pre-zombie life, you can set your watch to the inevitable zombie that pops out of the nearest potted plant and takes a chunk out of their arm. Their life resembles that of these early human settlers as they made their way along the vast migratory paths.

The other story line shows a fortified encampment known as Woodbury. In Woodbury, life is very different. They have reinforced gates manned with guards armed with assault rifles and grenades. They have a system of government. They have curfews, designated recreation time, and an abundance of food. This place is like paradise; it runs contrary to everything I ever thought I knew about post-apocalyptic life. If there is one thing I have learned about the zombie apocalypse, it is that only the scrappiest of people survive. You need to have a highly efficient metabolism, a Ph.D. in some apocalypse-relevant skillset, and you need to be willing to eat most types of larvae. Despite this fact, around a hundred people live prosperously in Woodbury, many of which don't look like they could make it up a flight of stairs, let alone hold off a zombie invasion. These people are doing scientific experiments, they're conducting black ops and reconnaissance on other tribes of people in the area—the security afforded by their numbers and tactics allows them to focus on other things. These two story lines take place in the same volatile, hostile world, but their lives are vastly different from one another.

# Presocratic East



As I mentioned before, at that infamous fork in the road at the fertile crescent there is one trail that goes east and one trail that goes west. The first leg of that trail that we are going to talk about is the western part of the fork. It stretches from northern Africa all the way to western Europe and heads directly through what in modern times we would refer to as Greece and Italy. This is the geographical hotbed where western philosophy first began. These two regions are typically divided by philosophy historians into the Ionian and Italian Pre-socratics. Ionian refers to the area that borders the Mediterranean Sea, which is made up of modern day Turkey and Greece. That whole section of the world is known as the Ionian Coast. But first, I need to explain something I wrote two sentences ago: the term Pre-socratic.

What is Pre-socratic? Well, what does Socratic even mean? Astute or educated readers will probably immediately notice the similarity to a name we've already mentioned: Socrates. To put it simply, Socrates is such a big deal in the history of philosophy that historians of philosophy just decided to lump everyone that came before him into one big insignificant group of wannabes.

*Philosophy Historian A: “But what about the centuries of intellectual progress before Socrates?”*

*Philosophy Historian B: “They'd probably be delighted just to be associated with someone as great as Socrates. Let's just call them: Those people that came before Socrates.”*

*Philosophy Historian A: “No, that's way too long. Let's call them: Pre-socratic”*

That conversation had to have happened at some point. Actually, it didn't—the term “Pre-socratic” was first written in the 1800's, and ever since then it kind of stuck. In my opinion, it's really quite sad.

That said, I'm absolutely confident their intentions were good. I know these people weren't purposefully trying to relegate dozens and dozens of brilliant thinkers into some second-rate teacher's aid status to Socrates. They were doing what I'm trying to do! They were trying their best to complete the disheartening task of categorizing thousands of years of philosophy.

On the other hand, Socrates was incredibly influential. It's not like the term is entirely unfounded; there's no question he changed philosophy in a big enough way to earn high praise, but the term Pre-socratic, I think, insinuates inferiority a little too much. Remember, these Pre-socratic philosophers were the sparks that started the fire of philosophy. We need to give them the respect they are due. It's so easy to be a twenty-first century quarterback of philosophy and look back at the ideas that these Pre-socratic philosophers had and laugh. I have heard so many people poke fun at the ideas of the Pre-socratics.

***Philosophy 101 student: “How could they possibly be stupid enough to think that?”***

***Grocery store checker: “I guess that was back when we were half-chimpanzees!”***

Yes, none of the ideas put forward by the Pre-socratics stuck around for very long, but in many ways they can be seen as the most important thinkers in history. They started the discourse that turned into what philosophy eventually became. They provided the spark that landed in the handful of leaves for us to blow on and try to nurture into something larger.

Let me set the stage for the next chapter of this story with an anecdote: magnets existed back in ancient Greece. One of these Pre-socratic philosophers looked at two magnets that were in close proximity to each other and saw that without the help of any human moving them, they mysteriously attracted each other and clung together. From this, he made an ambitious conclusion. He concluded that the magnets were obviously creating their own movement somehow, and that despite their appearance, they must be alive to be creating their own movement, they must have souls if they are alive, and they should be thought of as animals if they have souls.

Sure, on the surface this is completely ridiculous by today's standards. But I would argue that the guy that came up with this theory is as integral to the theory of relativity as Einstein himself. We needed this guy. We needed someone to begin the conversation. We needed someone to say that magnets are alive so that somebody else could come along and tell him that he has no idea what he is talking about. Because then the first guy would say, “Prove me wrong, then.”

The Pre-socratic philosophers are like the first prototype of any invention ever released. When you look at the first computer ever made it is far from the model of perfect efficiency. Firstly, it was the size of a mobile home. It had tons of moving parts that took multiple people to maintain and operate properly. It was a complete eyesore and power drain. But it was beautiful because it was necessary. If no one ever had the genius to innovate and create that eyesore, then there never would have been a second guy that looked at it, saw flaws, and tried to make it better. Fast forward through decades of innovation, and the computing power that used to fill an entire room is now dwarfed by the average universal remote control. The Pre-socratics can be thought of this way. Philosophy is the computer and the Pre-socratics are the first few models ever created.

But really, does it matter whether the Pre-socratics were absolutely correct? For me, philosophy has never been about reading infallible theories anyway. It has been about constant personal growth—learning how to not think in a black and white way about the world and my own existence. When you approach it this way, the Pre-socratics are as relevant as any philosopher because although their theories about magnets didn't stick around very long, these were brilliant people that gave an occasional commentary on what it means to be a human and the problems that they faced during their time. I guess I would be disappointed with them if I were extremely interested in magnets, but I'm not. Let me show you how even after 2500 years, the insights they offered about life can still bring a modern person solace.

CHAPTER

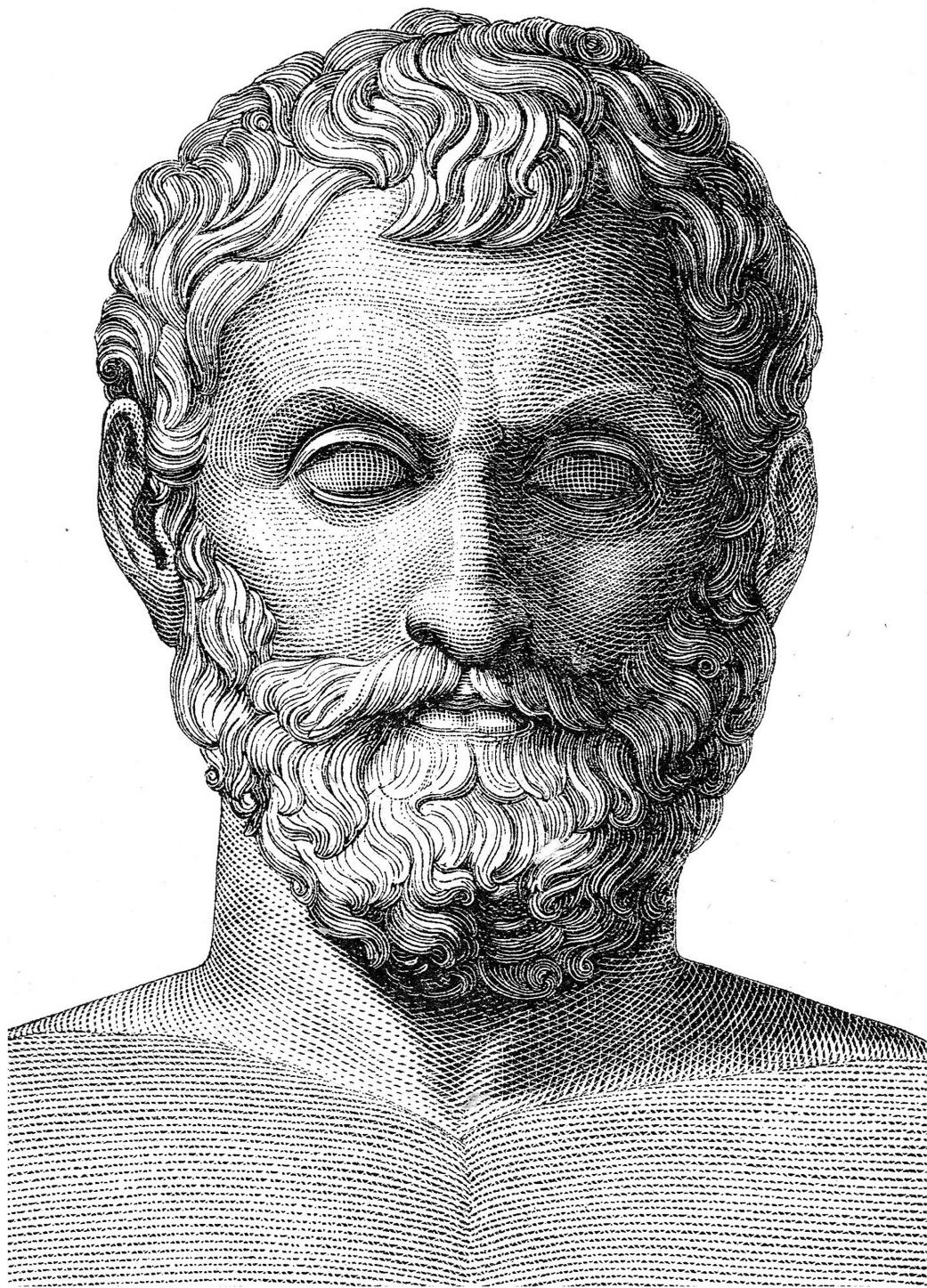
# 1

THALES

...

*"Time is wisest because it discovers everything."*

-Thales



**Thales of Miletus (624 BC - 546 BC) The first, but not the worst.**

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Even 2500 years ago, some people weren't satisfied with the explanation that a supernatural force created a terrarium for nature to exist in so that the chosen species—humans—could frolic around and enjoy it. Lucky us. This seems to be the main thing that sparked the thought of the early Greek philosophers. They looked around them and marveled at the unparalleled beauty of the natural world. Anyone who's left the confines of the concrete jungle they were born into can relate to this, though you could easily argue that every skyscraper, car, strip mall; nuclear weapons are just as much a part of nature as a bird's nest. But maybe that's for another book.

The point is, the ancient Greeks looked at the majestic beauty and seemingly purpose-driven nature of the natural world from trees to mountains to the mysterious lights that sparkled in the night sky, and they wondered if there might be a rational explanation for how all of this stuff came to be—one that didn't involve magic or a sexually promiscuous pantheon of gods that no one has ever seen before that control practically every aspect of your life.

This is why when we retrospectively look at Pre-socratic philosophy, it mostly concerns itself with what we now call metaphysics. Metaphysics is, at least in the smaller way it was being studied by the Pre-socratics, the branch of philosophy that asks, “What is everything made of and how did it get here?” The Pre-socratics wouldn't have thought they were pondering metaphysics; the word didn't even exist back then. But they needed to start somewhere, so why not with the mountains, animals, and trees? Why not with the most beautiful, mysterious stuff they had at their disposal?

But there needed to be a first philosopher and the general consensus among historians is that Thales was the guy. Thales was born around 620 BC. The exact date of his birth or philosophy are unknown. In fact, not a single fragment of his work survives to this day. The only things we know about him are from commentators that lived after him that probably had access to his work, but even that's kind of sketchy. What we know for certain is that

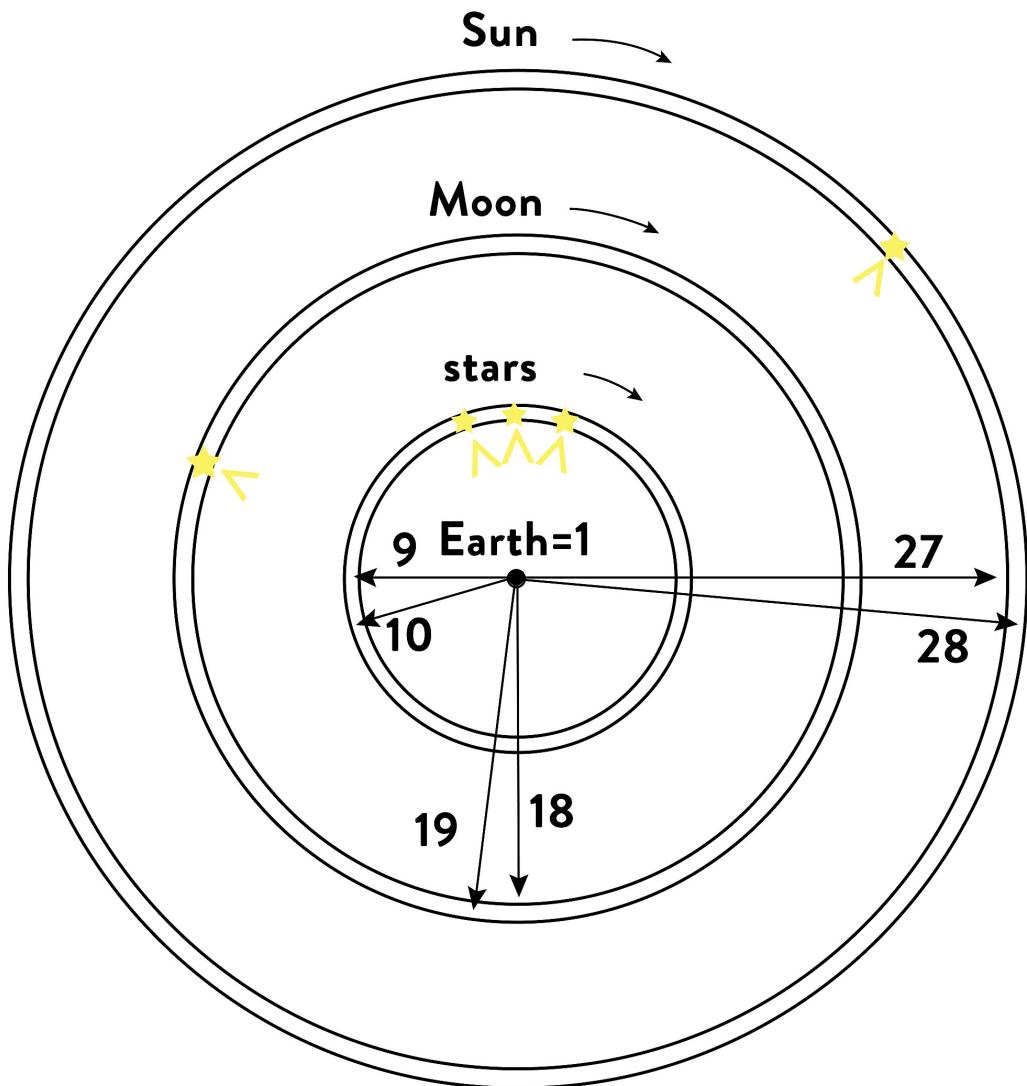
he was born and raised in Miletus which was an ancient Greek city located in what we would identify as modern day Turkey. It was one of the biggest and most successful cities in the world around the time Thales was born. It was so big and so successful that the Persians invaded in the sixth century BC and ruined everything. Seems logical. Anyway, there was something about the city that created such a fertile ground for philosophical thought that several great thinkers ended up emerging. Along with Thales, Anaximander and Anaxenemes make up the rest of what we now know as the Milesian School of thought.

I could write an entire book on the different colors of the tapestry that is Pre-socratic philosophy and compare all of the different schools of thought and how their ideas influenced each other, but let's be honest: nobody's reading this book to learn about the relationship between generations of conjecture. In my opinion, the biggest thing you should take away from Thales is his disruption of the norms that he was born into.

**“Nothing is more active than thought, for it flies over the whole universe; nothing is stronger than necessity, for all must submit to it.”**

I've always wondered: what sort of personality does it take to be a Thales? What sort of personality does it take to evoke radical change in the world? If you live in a world where the general consensus—meaning that all your friends and family agree emphatically—is that these natural events occurring all around you are being perpetrated by a supernatural God, what personality traits do you need to still be dissatisfied by that and to look for alternative answers?

Do you need to be a visionary like Steve Jobs? Do you need to be a super genius like Albert Einstein? Some people think you need to be crazy—Charles Manson crazy. They think your wiring needs to be a little off just to be able to think that far outside the framework of what is normal.



Anaximander's prediction of what the universe must look like.  
Even the earliest of the Milesians-- without telescopes or microscopes--  
could look at the world and infer pretty accurate characteristics about it.

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Only the oracle knows for sure, but my personal opinion after reading a few dozen of these notorious disruptors from history is that you need to be a little bit of all three. I think to be such an innovator of intellectual progress, Thales had to have been a strange conglomeration of all of these personality types. I say these sorts of statements cowering behind the safety of the fact that no one can ever prove or disprove anything that I'm saying. We don't have any pictures of the guy. He didn't have a Facebook page we can go back and look at. In fact, the only information we really have about his character that holds any water is a single story about him. However, I think this single story that we have offers us a pretty good idea about what he was like, and to feel the full effect of what I am getting at, we need to begin by thinking a bit about the kind of people he was dealing with and the intellectual climate of his time.

Back in Thales' day, people thought that there was a direct relationship between how pleased the harvest gods were and the yield of the crops at harvest time. They lived their lives thinking that there was a council of gods looking down on them that laid out a set of behaviors, and depending on how well they adhered to these behaviors, the gods would determine how many crops would be allowed to grow. I guess I could spend the next few paragraphs lambasting these people for being so childish and superstitious if this wasn't also the general premise for every fundamentalist interpretation of monotheistic religion in the world today. I respect their faith.

**“Hope is the only good that is common to all men; those who have nothing else possess hope still.”**

I want to make something clear: these people weren't bad people. When they created the Greek pantheon of gods to explain things they didn't understand and provide an incentive to act in a way that benefitted society as a whole, they weren't bad people, but they were less capable of harnessing certain aspects of nature to society's benefit. I've always wondered whether the undeniable benefits that organized religion has on regulating human behavior is greater than or less than the undeniable benefits of understanding the workings of nature. How many people have died of starvation thinking that it was God's will that they should starve to death? On the other hand, how many people have been wantonly murdered over possession of an ox because of a lack of a feeling of moral accountability? It's sad that for so long the two were mutually exclusive.



**Before Thales, if you wanted answers to mysteries about the natural world, you went to these guys. Painting by Raphael depicting a Greek God family reunion right before Uncle Zeus tells Aunt Athena that he secretly hates her.**

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Thales recognized this at some level. Maybe the amount of crops that came at harvest time had nothing to do with whether Zeus was having a heavy flow day; maybe there was another explanation-- a rational, non-magical explanation!

One thing Thales had the vigilance to notice throughout his short life in Miletus, was that there seemed to be a relationship between the amount of rainfall Miletus received each year and the amount of crops the farmers were able to harvest that year. So one year, he noticed it was raining a lot. It was raining almost every single day. Local TV weathermen across the world get jealous whenever they hear this story because they see it as a missed opportunity to say, "Hopefully I can get some sun for you next week!" As though those bastards control the weather. How dare they pretend to play God?

Anyway, when Thales noticed a higher rate of rainfall than usual in Miletus, he took every dime he had and bought up all the olive presses in town. This guy was the first Rockefeller. He secured a monopoly over the entire olive press rental industry of Miletus!

When the increased rain inevitably turned into massive amounts of olives, Thales laughed maniacally as the entire town came to him desperately looking to rent an olive press from the only guy in town that had one. He became rich. So rich he never had to work again.

On one hand we could label this guy as the world's first recorded one-percenter, but just theoretically, you have to marvel at what Thales did here. Thales used his observation, pattern recognition, and critical thinking to harness an understanding of a minute sub-section of nature, identified a pain point that others might have in the future, and then offered a solution to that pain point.

**"The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself."**

In short, Thales was playing chess while everyone else was playing checkers. Yes, I just used that overused cliché. But in fairness to me, it really sums up the little information we know about Thales and his character. Thales was surrounded by people that thought in terms of magic and were satisfied with what they'd been conditioned to believe since they were

children. Thales sought rational explanations for things. Thales was two steps ahead of these people. What's even more impressive is that he didn't have a Bobby Fischer to model himself after; he was the first guy to do this stuff!

Also consider the fact that it's not like Thales wasn't exposed to the same magical explanations that everyone else was during his time. He lived in the same world that everyone else did. He heard the same explanations; he just wasn't willing to declare them to be the absolute truth, with any further discussion of the matter being merely commentary on what he already knew. He wasn't willing to listen to what his parents told him, grab the soap, wash his hands of any further inquiry, and call it a life.

For a point of reference, here's an example of an explanation the average person would have been given for why boats sometimes experience high winds and storms when they're out at sea:

**"And from Typhoeus come boisterous winds which blow damply, fitfully upon the seas. Some rush upon the misty sea and work great havoc among men with their evil raging blasts. For varying with the season they blow, scattering ships and destroying sailors. And men who meet these upon the sea have no help against the mischief. Others again over the boundless flowering earth spoil the fair fields of men who dwell below, filling them with dust and cruel uproar."** - Hesiod

This passage is from a book titled "*Theogony*" by a guy named Hesiod, and for all intents and purposes, this was the department of education at the time. When Thales was looking for an explanation for why things behave the way they do in the natural world, this is the sort of stuff he had to work with! Not only that, but much like in other fundamentalist, dogmatic environments that kids are born into, just imagine the pressure Thales must have felt to conform to believing what everyone else around him believed.

Imagine being born into a home where your parents believe something, your teachers believe something, your friends believe something, and to even question that belief would make you an outcast—a damaged person, someone the rest of the community should feel bad for and try to help through their crisis of faith. When you live in a world carefully crafted so that even questioning the legitimacy of something causes you to be labeled as a social pariah and forced to go against everyone that matters in your life,

it can be extremely convenient and pressuring to just “go along with it.”

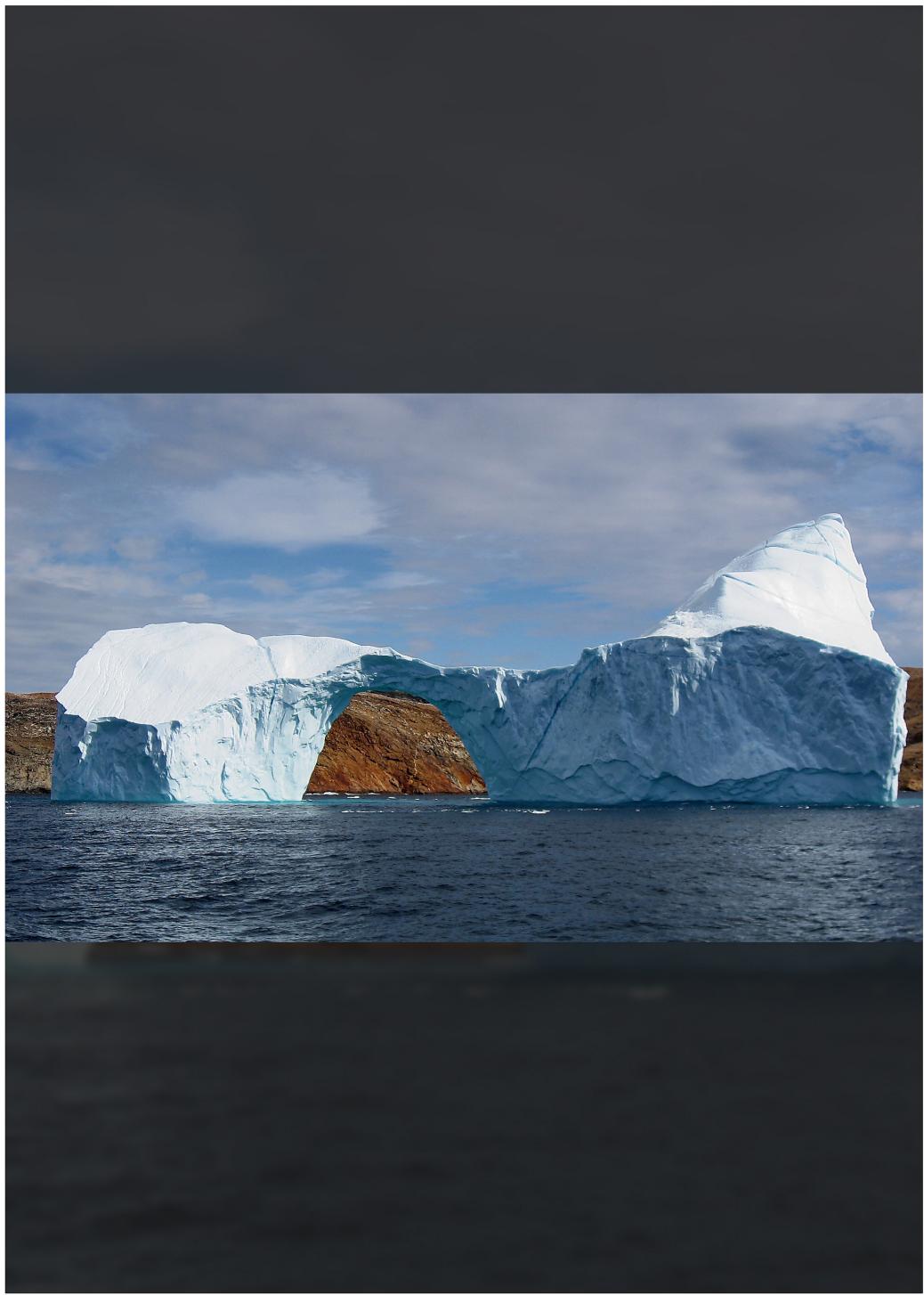
I apologize if this point is long-winded, but I think it is worth the time to consider. Thales was the first. Even if there were others before him, the courage it took for him to question what he did in the cultural and historical context he did is nothing short of astounding. Let that be a preface for everything else Thales tries to make sense of about this tornado of confusion that we live in.

The most famous theory that Thales is known for can be thought of as the first attempt at metaphysics in the history of western philosophy. I’m having a hard time coming up with a single adjective to describe how Thales must have felt at this point in his life. Once you’re Thales and you realize you aren’t satisfied with the typical God-centric explanations for why lightning bolts shoot from the sky, you must be filled with questions. What questions are worth asking? Where do lightning bolts come from? Where do I even begin?

The method that he eventually arrived at would move human thought in a direction it had never been before.

Thales began his quest by looking at something that there seemed to be a lot of in this world: water. He looked at the ocean and saw that it was pretty clearly a body of water. He saw lakes and streams and noticed that they too were made of water. We live in a world where it actually rains water from the sky! In fact, he saw that every living thing, at least as far as he could tell, needed water as an intrinsic part of its existence. If it didn’t get enough water, it would die. Plain and simple.

One thing seemed clear to Thales: water seemed very important to this whole process. From here, he took it one step further. To him, it seemed like the land that we live on was floating on top of the water in the ocean. He explicitly compared the land that humans occupy to a log floating on a lake. Then he thought, “Why am I assuming that the land is a log at all? Why can’t the land be water as well, albeit in a different form?”



**Just in this picture alone we see water taking many different forms and consistencies. We can put ourselves in Thales' makeshift flip-flops and see why he may have looked around him and seen everything as different forms of water!**

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Water is a pretty versatile substance. It can be solid in the form of ice, it can be amorphous in its liquid form, it can be vaporous in the form of gas or steam; there wasn't another substance around him that he would've been able to see that had as much variation as water. Given all of this, Thales arrived at a far from seamless, incredible insight: everything in the entire world is made of water.

The general idea that Thales is presenting here—that everything in the universe is comprised of a single substance—is called monism. Francis Bacon sums up his monist theory beautifully here:

**“Thales asserted Water to be the principle of things. For he saw that matter was principally dispensed in moisture, and moisture in water; and it seemed proper to make that the principle of things, in which the virtues and powers of beings, and especially the elements of their generations and restorations, were chiefly found. He saw that the breeding of animals is in moisture ; that the seeds and kernels of plants (as long as they are productive and fresh), are likewise soft and tender; that metals also melt and become fluid, and are as it were concrete juices of the earth, or rather a kind of mineral waters; that the earth itself is fertilised and revived by showers or irrigation, and that earth and mud seem nothing else than the lees and sediment of water; that air most plainly is but the exhalation and expansion of water; nay, that even fire itself cannot be lighted, nor kept in and fed, except with moisture and by means of moisture. He saw, too, that the fatness which belongs to moisture, and which is the support and life of flame and fire, seems a kind of ripeness and concoction of the water.” - Francis Bacon**

To me, Thales is as baffling as he is emasculating. Think of how brilliant this guy was. Thales was a pioneer. Think of the conditions that most pioneers are faced with.

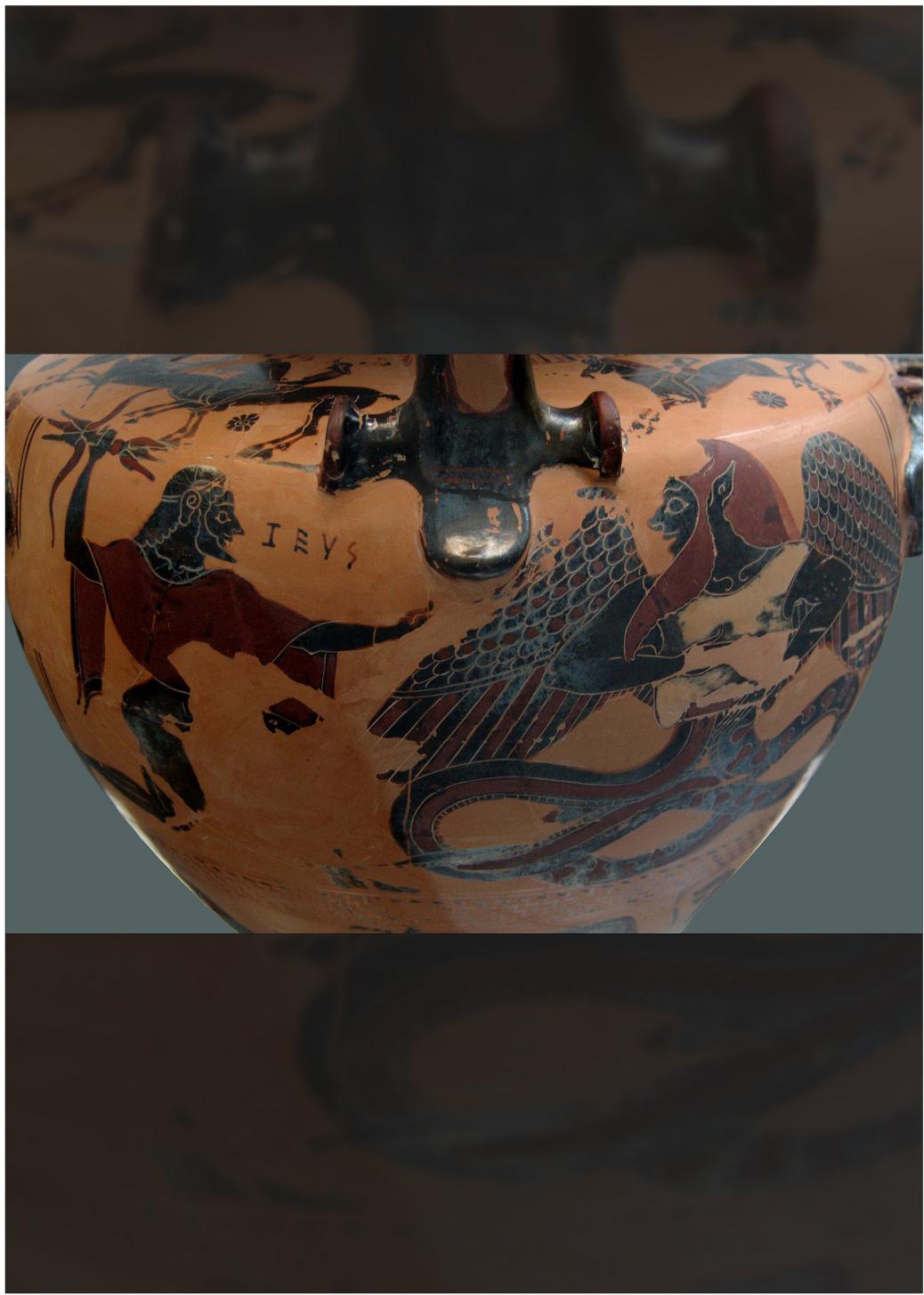
Most pioneers throughout history have been forced by exterior circumstances to innovate. Some terrible thing happens, some intense scarcity is forced upon them, and when their backs are up against a wall they find a way to use their ingenuity to pull humanity out of certain doom.

Thales didn't have any of that. He was born into a prosperous city and could've easily lived a life of leisure. What could've possibly motivated him

to be so dissatisfied with the current narrative?

Maybe it was boredom. Maybe it was a deeply-rooted inferiority complex. But maybe it was something bigger. Maybe it was a grand vision for the future. Maybe he knew he was the spark that would ignite into a fire that would usher in new ideas and eventually bring about the incredible time period that we live in today.

Whether he could see the future beyond the next olive harvest or not, he certainly was not the only spark to get the fire of philosophy going, and the next spark we're going to talk about wouldn't have cared if you thought he was a spark. Come to think of it, he wouldn't have cared what you thought about him or his philosophy at all.



**Sculpture depicting Zeus putting an end to Typhos (Typhoeus) and the destruction he wrought upon humans. When it came to understanding why the world is mean sometimes, this is all people had before Thales. It had to be stopped!**

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CHAPTER

# 2

HERACLITUS

...  
“Nothing endures but change.”  
-Heraclitus



**Heraclitus (535 BC - 475 BC) Wringing his hands, weeping over how much better he is than everyone else in a painting by Johannes Moreelse.**

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## **“Nothing endures but change.”**

Heraclitus was a character, to say the least. Again, it takes a little bit of crazy to think of the world in such novel terms. All of the Pre-socratics had very dynamic personalities, and Heraclitus was no exception. There tend to be certain stereotypical philosopher personalities that emerge and recur throughout history; one of the most common is the guy who resigns himself from public life, locks himself away in a tower, and thinks in complete solitude.

Most of the time, these people lock themselves away for the sake of utility. It makes sense; philosophers are in the business of taking human thought to the next level—of arriving at a place in their brain and having a thought that no human being has ever had before. The last thing you want to do if you're trying to come up with a thought that no human has ever had before is to have your thoughts polluted with conventional thinking. Just imagine being on the verge of having a philosophical breakthrough when all of a sudden your neighbor in a Hawaiian shirt waves at you from across the yard and wants to talk to you about how sunny it's been recently. What a nightmare.

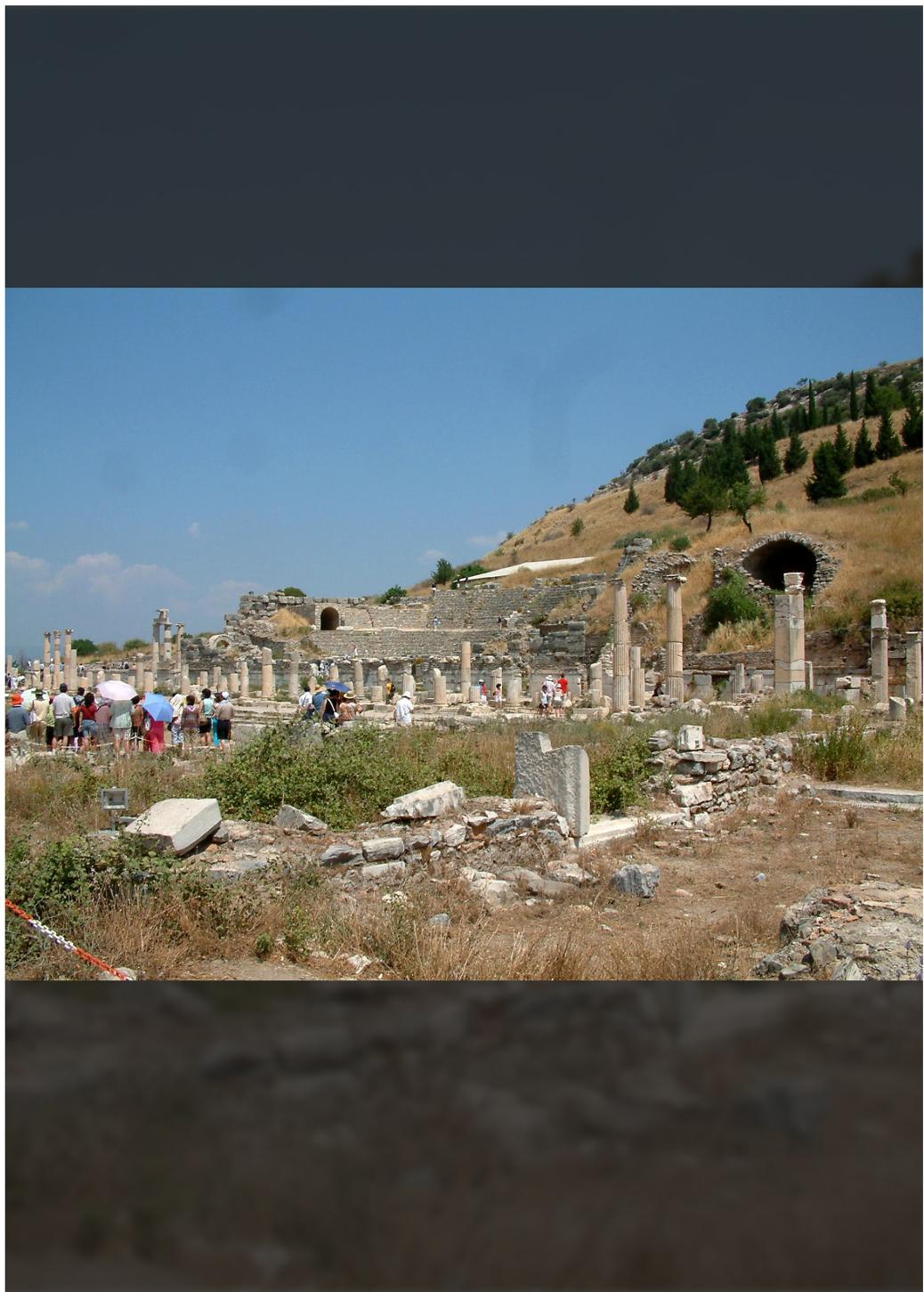
But out of all of these philosophers who chose to isolate themselves while doing their thinking, Heraclitus may have been the guy who enjoyed the process the most. He loved being away from people. If he wasn't known as a brilliant Pre-socratic philosopher, he could've gone down in history as the worst Wal-Mart greeter to ever don the coveted blue vest.

Heraclitus wasn't just introverted; he hated people. He truly would've been a happier person if he lived at a point in history when language and human interaction didn't exist. He had nothing but contempt for everyone around

him who didn't understand him or his ideas about the nature of existence.

Think I'm joking? He went out of his way to take measures to make sure future readers could never understand his work. Future historians of philosophy referred to him as "The Riddler," because he purposefully chose to write all of his works in this oddly structured prose of riddles and extended metaphors. He didn't do this to sound deep. He did this so that other people wouldn't be able to understand what he was saying. He's actually loosely quoted as saying that he would be completely content if everything he had ever written was lost or burned after his death.

Maybe you think I'm still exaggerating or being too hard on the guy. Maybe you think he's like the Grinch—isolated, but just misunderstood. Well, much like with Thales, we have a story from his life that removes all doubt about how he conducted himself on a daily basis. But similar to the other story, we need a quick historical background to fully understand the implications of what happened.



**The remnants of the town of Ephesus. Birthplace of Heraclitus and a revolving door of people to annoy him.**

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Heraclitus lived during a period in history where the geographic regions of Greece and Persia had a complicated relationship. There was a man named Darius I who was the ruler of Persia at the time, and not many people would contest you if you claimed that he was the most powerful man in the world.

When you're the most powerful man in the world, you can treat people however you want. If you want to compliment their fashion choice, you can. If you want to disembowel them in front of their family, not much is stopping you. So we can be certain that Darius wasn't sending too many authors fan mail during the time when he sent a letter to Heraclitus complimenting him and telling him that he was fascinated by the book he just released on natural philosophy.

There really is no modern comparison for what a normal person should have felt in the shoes of Heraclitus. Imagine if you wrote a book and the leader of an opposing world super power sent you an email telling you how much he enjoyed it and that he wants you to fly across the globe and come to his headquarters and have a Q&A session with him. This is exactly what Darius asked of Heraclitus, but instead of one world leader, Darius would be the equivalent of multiple world leaders sewn together like a giant human centipede of powerful world leaders (minus the lack of sanitation).

Heraclitus, who was not too keen on rolling out of bed for other people, let alone walking hundreds of miles for them, considers thinking long and hard but ends up thinking short and soft and sends back this message to Darius:

**"All the men that exist in the world are far removed from truth and just dealings. But they are full of evil foolishness which leads them to insatiable covetness and vain glorious ambition. I, however, forgetting**

**all their worthlessness and shunning satiety, and who wish to avoid all envy on the part of my countrymen and all appearance of arrogance will never come to Persia, since I am quite contented with a little and live as best suits my own inclination.”**

This is the 500BC version of a girl telling you that she is busy on Friday. And Saturday. In fact, she is going to be busy for a while because she is moving soon and she has finals week coming up.

Was it truly impossible for Heraclitus to come to Persia without all of his countrymen labeling him as arrogant and overly ambitious? I would argue not. I would argue that this response to Darius is indicative of his personality. Even in the face of the most powerful man in the world at the time, he still keeps his unflinching resolve.

On one hand this may seem like a missed opportunity. Darius obviously was a fan of Heraclitus—think of what he could have done for the guy! How might history be different if Heraclitus would have just swallowed his pride and taken the trip to Persia?

But when you read what little there is that survives about Heraclitus, you gather that much of what made him influential in the world of philosophy can only be explained by his unique personality; this unique lens that he viewed the world through gave him a competitive advantage. In a weird “chicken or the egg” sort of way, I don’t think the Heraclitus that accepts the trip to Persia is the same Heraclitus that changes the direction of human thought.



If you're wondering why the ideas of these philosophers aren't as comprehensive as you'd otherwise like, it's because this is what we're working with. This is an example of one of the fragments of a pre-socratic work.

When Heraclitus was in his sunset years, he was plagued by a condition known as edema. Edema is a build-up of fluids in the tissues of the body that in some cases is a natural response that can be helpful, but in the case of Heraclitus was potentially fatal.

Needless to say, in 500 BC we were in a very different place in the world of medicine. Heraclitus went to every doctor in his region and asked each of them for their professional opinion based on their lifetime of practicing medicine. At first glance, this doesn't seem like something Heraclitus would do. Heraclitus legitimately caring about the opinions of another person? That's not the Heraclitus I know and love!

Unfortunately, Heraclitus decides shortly after seeing all the doctors to discount all of the advice they gave him because he saw himself as intellectually superior to them. He knew he had a serious ailment. He figured there had to be a cure, so he thought for weeks and eventually landed on a completely new and innovative therapy for people suffering from edema.

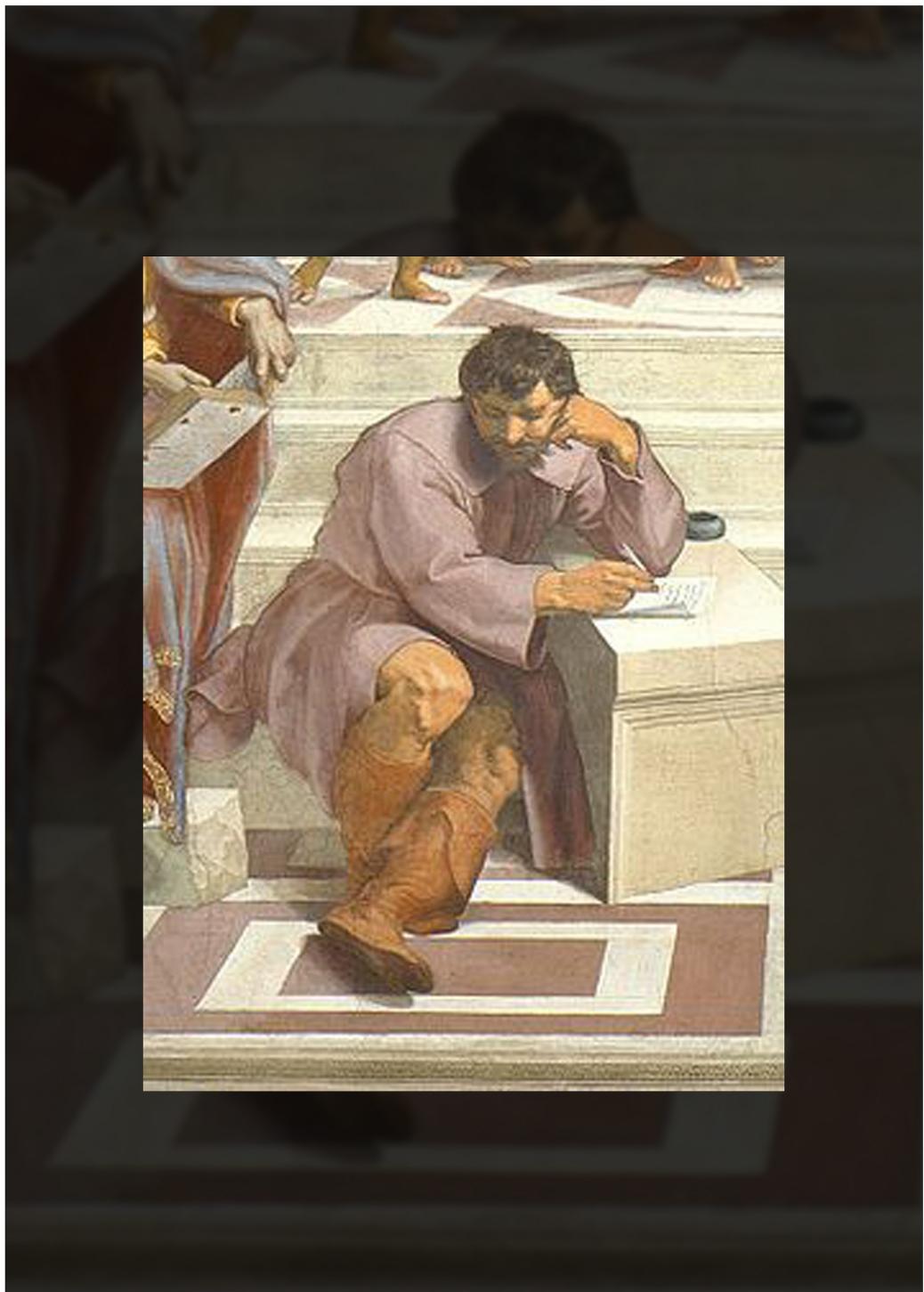
His plan was to bury himself up to his neck in cow manure and sit in the sun.

I am not joking.

This sounds like his friends played a terrible April Fool's prank on him that he took seriously. There had to have been other ideas he was mulling around in his head. Of all the ideas he had for curing his condition, I wonder if there was one that was maybe a little less likely to work, but didn't involve Heraclitus spending the final moments of his life making himself into a cow poop Lean Pocket.

To be fair to Heraclitus, his thinking wasn't totally random. His idea was that the sun would heat up the manure to the point that it would extract all the

excess liquid from his system. Personally, I probably would have tried water first, but to each his own. Heraclitus died in that manure cocoon, but not before leaving behind a legacy that would influence people for centuries to come.



**Alone, body language turned away from the group, working in solitude. The artist Raphael absolutely nails Heraclitus in this one.**

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**“Good character is not formed in a week or a month. It is created little by little, day by day. Protracted and patient effort is needed to develop good character.”**

While Thales tried to make sense of everything by identifying the substance it was made of, Heraclitus tried to make sense of everything by appealing to the concept that somehow things were connected by some “divine logos.”

Logos is a word that is highly debated among historians of philosophy. Nobody can provide a completely bulletproof explanation for exactly what was meant by it, but there is common ground among all of the conflicting opinions.

The consensus is that when Heraclitus referred to things being connected by a “divine logos,” he was referring to a universal cosmic law that governs all things. The reason there is so much confusion about the definition of the word is not only because of how long ago it was used and how little we have to extract a definition from, but because later Greek thinkers—quite inconsiderately to me writing this book, I may add—used the exact same word but were referring to something entirely different. The main thing to take from this is that Heraclitus thought the world was a harmoniously ordered, though constantly changing thing. And to fully understand why he felt that way, we need to look at a typical misconception that people have when they go about their daily lives making judgments about things in the world.

Heraclitus says that when we go about our lives and try to make sense of the world, we tend to think about things in terms of their opposites. We think of something like daytime and we think that the opposite of it is nighttime. We feel something hot and we tend to think that the opposite of hot is cold.

**“Couples are wholes and not wholes, what agrees disagrees, the concordant is discordant. From all things one and from one all things.”**

But Heraclitus asks us to consider a slightly different alternative. What if day and night were the same thing in two different stages? What if we thought of them not as two separate entities in themselves, but as opposite ends of a spectrum, and that we exist at different points within that spectrum at all times? What if hot and cold are just two sides of the same coin that is constantly flipping?

The significance of this if we apply it to our daily lives is massive. Instead of the usual way we interact with the world—feeling as though we are living through a series of fixed states and being disappointed when things inevitably change—what if we viewed things as one entity that's constantly in a state of motion and change?

Similar to a ship constantly rising and falling with the sway of the ocean, causing the crew on board to constantly adapt and compensate, the universe, to Heraclitus, is in a perpetual state of flux or change, and we are the crew members.

Heraclitus famously said:

**“You could not step twice into the same river; for other waters are ever flowing on to you.”**

At first glance this seems like a childish superstition of early man, but he didn't mean that you literally can't step in the same river twice.

If you jumped into a river, climbed out, returned to land, waited a while, and

then jumped back into the river, Heraclitus would say that you're jumping into a completely different river than you did the first time. The reason he says this is because the river is constantly moving and changing.

When you jumped in the first time, your body was immersed in a collection of water molecules. When you jumped in the second time, your body was still immersed in a collection of water molecules, but it didn't touch any of the same water molecules as it did the first time. The water that you jumped into the first time is half a mile down the river at this point.

This is significant because, as humans, we typically think of a river as one fixed, unchanging part of the landscape. In reality, it is a maelstrom of change and flux. Another good example of this is spinning a top. The top appears to spin on one fixed point on the table, standing completely still, but in reality it's changing rapidly in a circular motion. Nothing in this world, to Heraclitus, stays the same. The only constant in this world is change.

Nothing maintains its reality for very long because it is constantly changing like the water flowing through the river. It's in a constant state of flux, battling toward one end of the spectrum or another.

Another reason Heraclitus felt that it was a mistake to think of things in terms of opposites is because one of the two things that are supposedly opposites of each other always gives the other one significance. If it was impossible to alter your consciousness in any way, would the term "sobriety" have any meaning to you? If it was impossible for someone to feel sad, would the term "happy" exist?

**"Opposition brings concord. Out of discord comes the fairest harmony."**

Think about it: you can put a Duraflame log in your fireplace and start a fire

seven days a week and never feel particularly moved by the heat it's giving off. You can walk around in the middle of July and feel the hot sun beating down on you as though God is punishing you. You can be at the gym sweating bullets, angry at the heat, begging the roided up membership salesman to just turn on a fan already!

But when you've been stranded out in the mountains, lost without a tent or any means of survival, your body freezing and beginning to shut down, and you find your cabin and sit next to the fire, you value heat tremendously—much more than you did in the other circumstances.

This insight by Heraclitus about the universe is something we can all relate to. Food never tastes as good as when you're starving. Sleep never feels as satisfying as when you're exhausted. The examples of what Heraclitus is talking about are endless.

The bottom line is: change is the only constant in this world.

There are tons of people in today's world who model their lives after security. It's understandable; from the earliest years of our lives, we're told to do so. You go to school for decades of your life so that one day you might hopefully land a "stable" job. You want a "stable" relationship. You want to live in a gated community, you buy insurance, you eat healthy—all of these things are attempts at keeping the good times good and avoiding some unforeseen adversity that could throw a monkey wrench in this great life you have constructed for yourself. There is nothing wrong with these behaviors; what is wrong is that the adversity is unforeseen.

We know that change is inevitable, but for some reason when it rears its ugly head in our lives and we're left to pick up the pieces, we oftentimes wonder

what went wrong. We ask ourselves what we could've done better to prevent it from occurring. Sometimes we even get angry about change. All of this is wasted energy, and Heraclitus would no doubt agree. The sooner you understand that change is the only inevitability, the sooner we can focus on what truly makes you successful: your ability to adapt to that change.

CHAPTER

# 3

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DEMOCRITUS

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...  
“There are many who know many things, yet are lacking in wisdom.”

-Democritus



**Democritus** - "The Laughing Philosopher" because people thought he was crazy,  
but he got the last laugh.

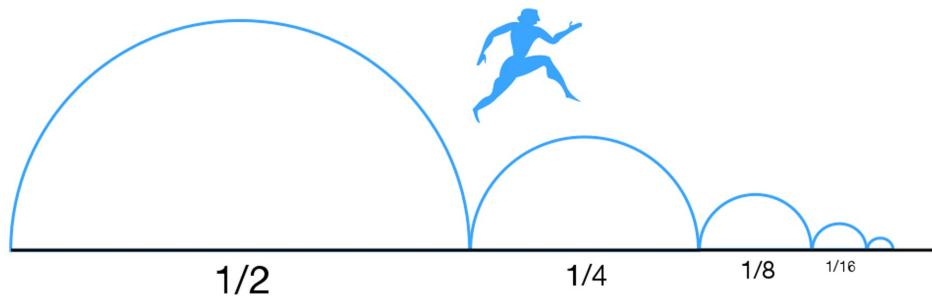
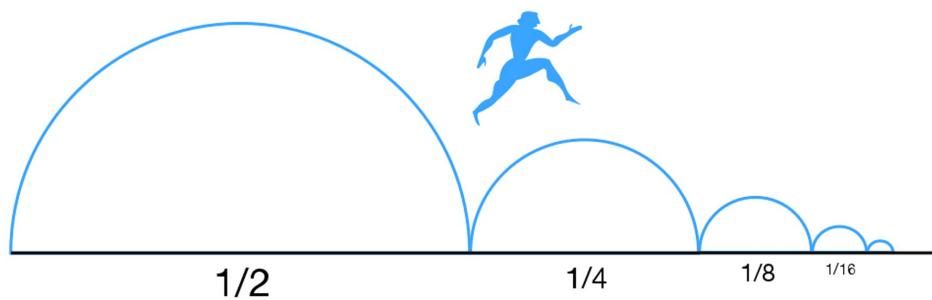
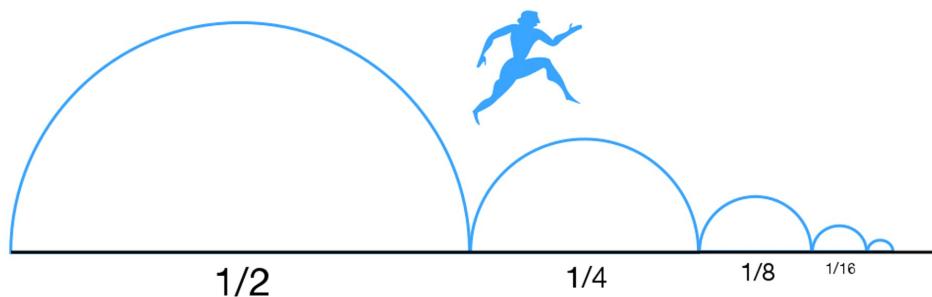
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**“There are many who know many things, yet are lacking in wisdom.”**

It is mind numbing for me to think about living in 400 BC and somehow arriving at the idea that the seemingly solid objects around you are actually made up of billions of smaller particles that you can't see. It's incredible knowing that in a world without microscopes or YouTube, using only his intuition and reason, Democritus and his teacher Leucippus concluded that what ultimately makes up the world must be a massive collection of what they called “atoms.”

These people weren't psychic. They didn't consult some gypsy woman. So how did they see so far into the future? Yet again, another example of the great thinkers of an age possessing this courageous spirit. Imagine living during that time period, looking at the world around you, and telling your friends, “I think this tree over here that looks entirely solid is actually made up of a near infinity of little specks that we can't see.” Your friends would probably wrap you in a circa 400 BC straight jacket.

Let's clear up an easy misconception to have: when Democritus talked about an atom, he was talking about something very different than what you and I would call an atom. The explanation actually comes down to the language that they spoke. The word atom can be broken down into two parts: “a” which means “not” and “tom” which means “to cut”. When they used the word atom they were just using the only word they had to describe something that they thought was uncuttable.



**Zeno said the runner will always have to travel half the distance to the next point, and therefore will never truly reach the finish line-- just like I will never truly reach the end of Zeno's paradoxes because they are annoying.**

---

Obviously, this is much different than the atoms we pretend to know about when talking to our friends in modern times; atoms are far from uncuttable. We split atoms all the time. Now we know they're made of protons, neutrons, electrons and who knows what else. So why would an ancient philosopher living in 400 BC ever even think to arrive at the conclusion that there must be a particle underneath how we perceive reality that is "uncuttable"? To understand the answer to that question, we need to look at a famous paradox that Democritus was responding to with his work, which was originally put out a few generations earlier by a guy named Zeno. Zeno was a philosopher who spent a great deal of time in his life finding paradoxes. Not only was he fascinated by them, but his primary motivation in trying to find these paradoxes was to silence his critics and prove once and for all that what we see as motion is nothing but an illusion. He has several famous paradoxes that always have fun little stories that go along with them. But anyway, back to Democritus. The paradox posed by Zeno that heavily influenced Democritus was known as his Dichotomy Paradox, and while the full explanation of it could take an entire chapter in itself, the simplified version is as follows:

Imagine a track star at the Olympics crouched down at the starting line preparing to run the 100-meter dash. No one would disagree that in order for the athlete to reach the finish line, he would first have to run halfway to the finish line. Once he was at that halfway point, if he still wanted to reach the finish line he would first have to run to the halfway point between those two points. This process could go on infinitely. Zeno says that it is impossible for the athlete to ever actually reach the finish line, because he will be infinitely presented with this problem of having to go halfway to the finish line. Eventually, he will be right next to the finish line, gyrating, looking like he is having a seizure because he will be moving fractions of an inch, but nonetheless still moving to the halfway point.

Even if this seems like a silly story to tell, the significance of this paradox in philosophy is far reaching. There are so many good questions to ask here, but one of the main questions we can derive from it is the question that plagued Democritus for years: is matter infinitely divisible?

We know you can divide things to a certain extent. We know you can take a pizza and divide it into eight, sixteen, maybe even thirty-two slices if you were really weird. But how far can that go? Can you cut the pizza into 64 slices? How about 256 slices? Eventually, if you continue the natural progression of this thought experiment, you would be left with the entire pizza separated into individual crumbs, but is that the limit to its divisibility?

No, at least in theory, we could get a pizza microscope and with the proper equipment and lack of social life, we could divide those crumbs even further. Democritus reasoned that there had to be an end to this divisibility of matter. This process of pizza slicing can not go on forever. The rumor goes that while Democritus was traveling, sitting in a foreign room with beams of sunlight shining through the window, he saw particles of dust floating all around him—particles that do certainly exist but are unable to be seen without the proper conditions in place.

Democritus thought that because this process of division cannot go on forever, there must be some incredibly small, fundamental piece of material that everything is made of which is un-cuttable. He called this piece of material an atom.

**“Nothing exists except atoms and empty space, everything else is opinion.”**

What he reasoned from there was an idea that the universe is, at its most basic level, two things: atoms and void. He envisioned the universe as an

incredible place—a massive flurry of a nearly infinite number of atoms swirling through space, connecting and disconnecting, all of which have unique properties that combine to make the larger objects we see. In a world where people thought that magnets were alive and had souls, in a world where people were vilified for questioning the narrative of the Gods, in a world filled with people satisfied with blind superstition and fairy tales, Democritus dared to reason and arrived at a mechanistic view of the universe.

Needless to say, this didn't win him very many fans, especially when the people commenting on his philosophy became increasingly monotheistic and coercive as the years went on. Because of this, even though Democritus wrote more books than almost all of the Pre-socratics combined, only a fraction of his work survives.

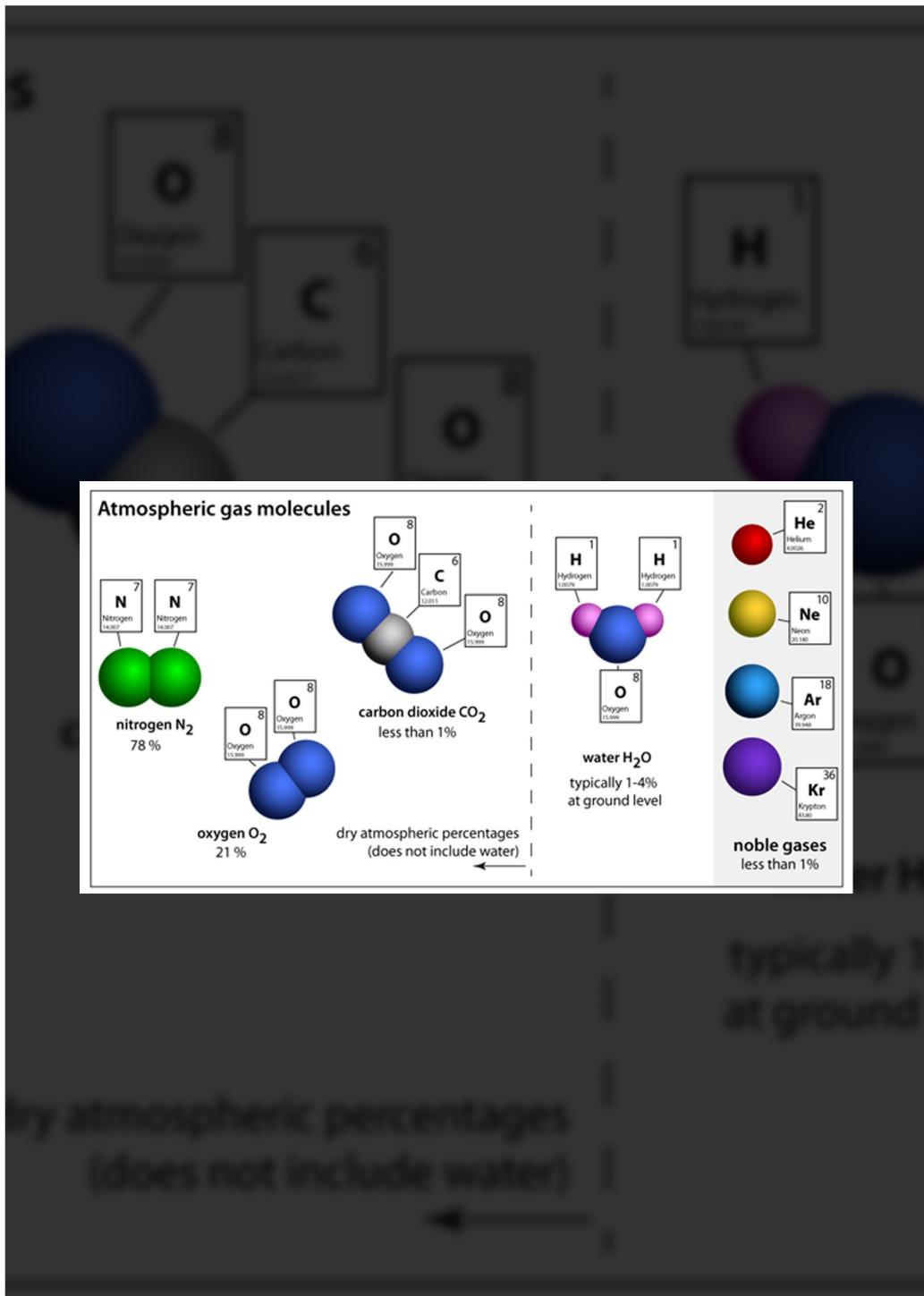


**Democritus explained what we perceive as the universe as a flurry of a nearly infinite number of atoms and a void they interact within. All is in reality: atoms and void.**

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It's sad. But honestly, I don't think he would've cared. Artists for generations have made elaborate paintings depicting various philosophers from antiquity, and whenever you see a painting of Democritus the artist always portrays him with a big smile on his face—sometimes he's even laughing. The reason is because he's become known to history as the laughing philosopher. Because despite his work being lost or destroyed, despite century after century of scientifically illiterate cowards ridiculing him and telling him that what he suggested was preposterous, he ended up getting the last laugh.

**“Medicine heals diseases of the body, wisdom frees the soul from passions.”**



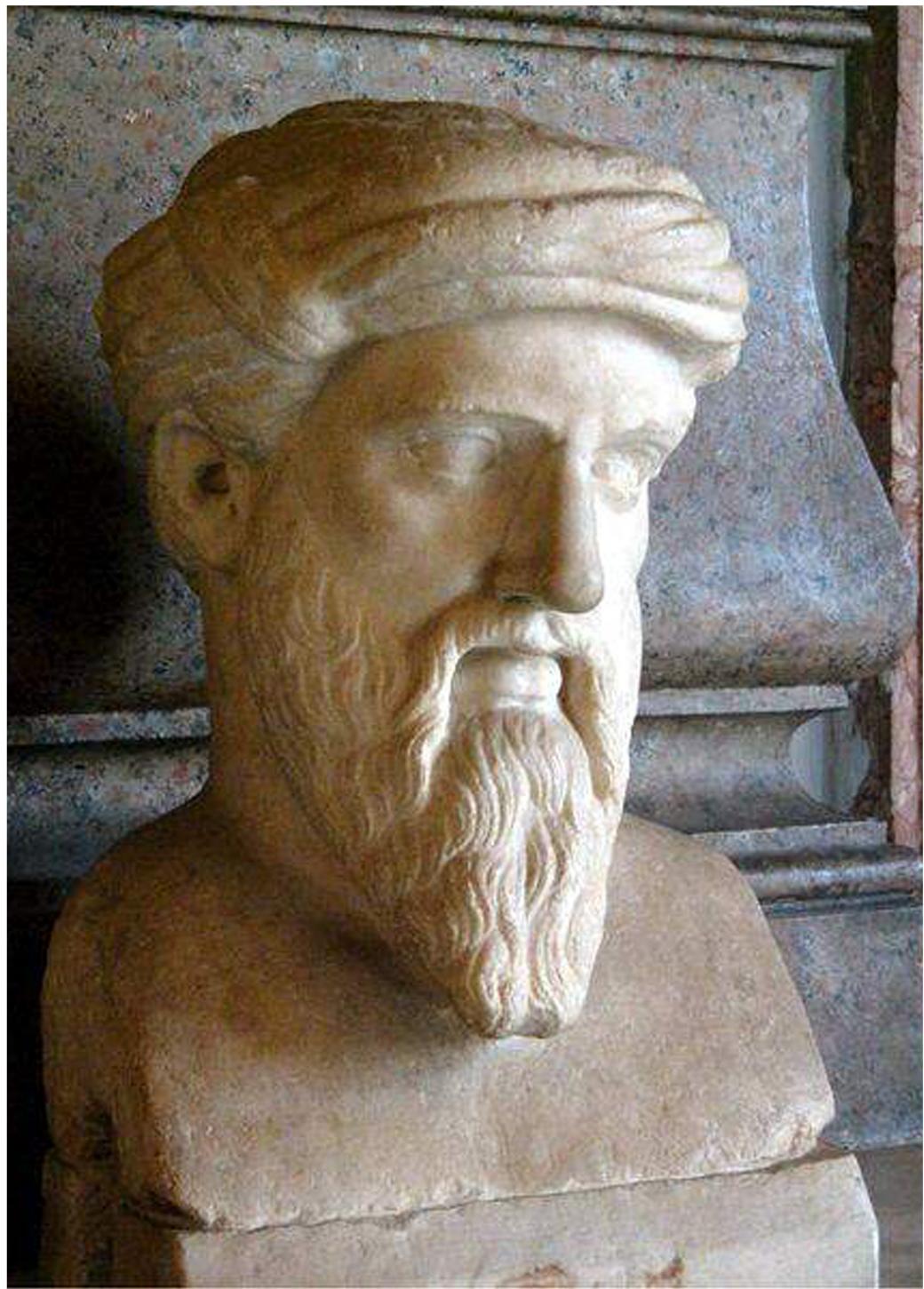
Similar to the way we see molecules, Democritus predicted that atoms themselves possess different unique characteristics that account for their properties. Obviously, not perfect. But not bad for a guy with nothing but eyes made for finding bananas.

CHAPTER

# 4

P Y T H A G O R A S

...  
"Rest satisfied with doing well, and leave others to  
talk of you as they please."  
-Pythagoras



**Pythagoras (570 BC - 495 BC)**

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**“Rest satisfied with doing well, and leave others to talk of you as they please.”**

If you're anything like me, when you hear the name Pythagoras you probably think of the Pythagorean Theorem. You probably start breaking out into a sweat and having post-traumatic stress flashbacks to seventh grade pre-algebra class. To this day, I sleep with a legal pad of graph paper under my pillow each night.

Just consider the fact that the exact same information that was so powerful it made a man believe he was a messiah in a religious movement 2500 years ago, in today's world, is the mid-term for seventh grade math class. Human progress never ceases to amaze me.

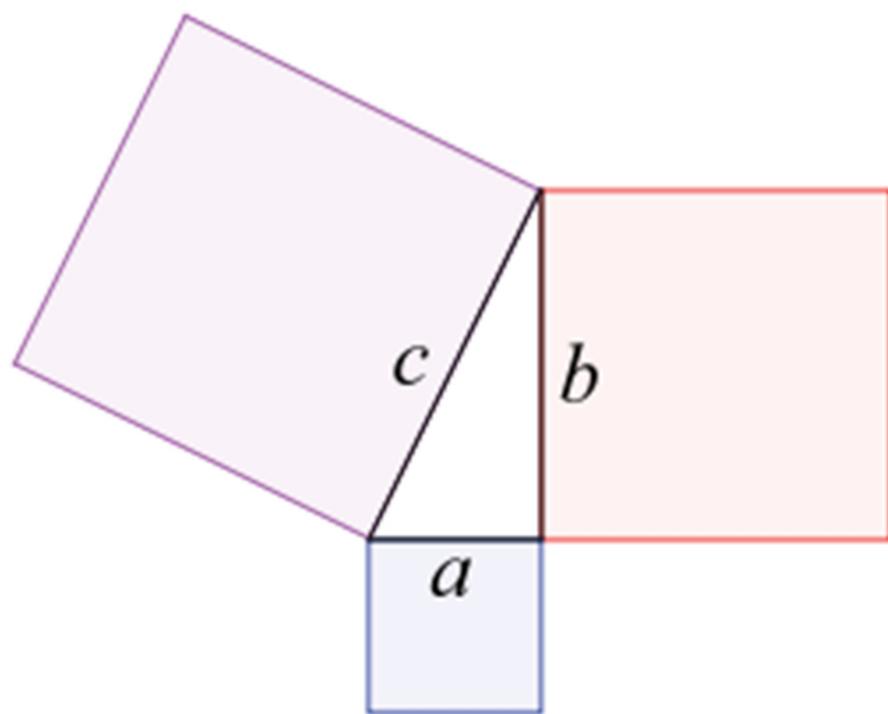
I imagine a world a thousand years removed from today when a seventh grader will need to build and pilot their own lunar rover. Let's be real; it won't take nearly that long.

Pythagoras was, for all intents and purposes, a crazed cult leader. But he didn't always have a glamorous, ritualistic cult leader lifestyle. The details are hazy, but it seems clear he was born in Italy into a pretty rich and notorious family. Most historians think that it was this life of luxury that allowed him to travel early in his life and study at the Milesian School with the successors of Thales.

I don't want to completely discount the idea that Pythagoras was a god. I fully concede to the point that he very well may have been anointed by some divine spirit. But whether he actually was a god, or whether his education

merely made him seem like a god at the time, he eventually came back to Italy, moved south and settled in a town called Croton. Here, with his charisma and his basic grasp of the alphabet, he easily gathered over 300 loyal followers who were foaming at the mouth and ready to serve this deity that assumed human form and called himself Pythagoras.

I'm not being dramatic. It seems clear that these people truly thought he was a god. His followers tell multiple stories of him performing all kinds of supernatural things, from simple magic tricks to downright sorcery. There's even a story that Pythagoras was in two places simultaneously. I ask the reader of this book one simple question: how can you explain that? You may sit atop your ivory tower and pretend it was a fabricated story to add legitimacy to the message that he represented, but why would so many people lie? I await your responses by email, but I highly doubt I will get any worth reading.



A squared + B squared = C squared. It's as basic as it get's in today's world. But at one point on this very same planet it brought a level of clarity to the universe that people think a man was a God.

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Here's another thing that instantly illustrates how different of a world we live in today: if Pythagoras showed up today in his flip flops and robe making YouTube videos about himself being a God, nobody would buy it. Come to think of it, with the crazy collection of YouTube videos I search for, he'd probably be at the top of my "Related Videos" section. My point is: the average YouTube commenter has enough critical thinking ability to debunk this guy, and that's really saying something.

I'm going to go out on a limb and say that my personal opinion is that Pythagoras was not a god walking among men. I know. What a courageous stance to take. I feel this way for a couple reasons.

One, I've read a lot of history; especially history from before accurate record keeping was a priority for us as a species. I've read a lot of stories about people performing miracles, walking on water, shooting energy beams out of their naughty places—I've heard it all. I give an equal amount of legitimacy to all of these claims; to do otherwise would be so transparently out of convenience it wouldn't even be worth discussing.

Two, when you're telling a story, it's very easy to embellish little pieces of it for the sake of entertainment value. We've all done this before at a party. The bully you beat up in high school is always a foot taller than he actually was; the dreamy guy you had a summer fling with looked like the Brawny paper towel guy. We tend to embellish stories to give them dramatic effect.

I mean no offense to anyone who is a modern day devoutly religious follower of Pythagoras; I don't think he was really a god. I like to separate the whole culture surrounding Pythagoras into two distinct halves: the message that's at the core of his teachings and the magical, supernatural part

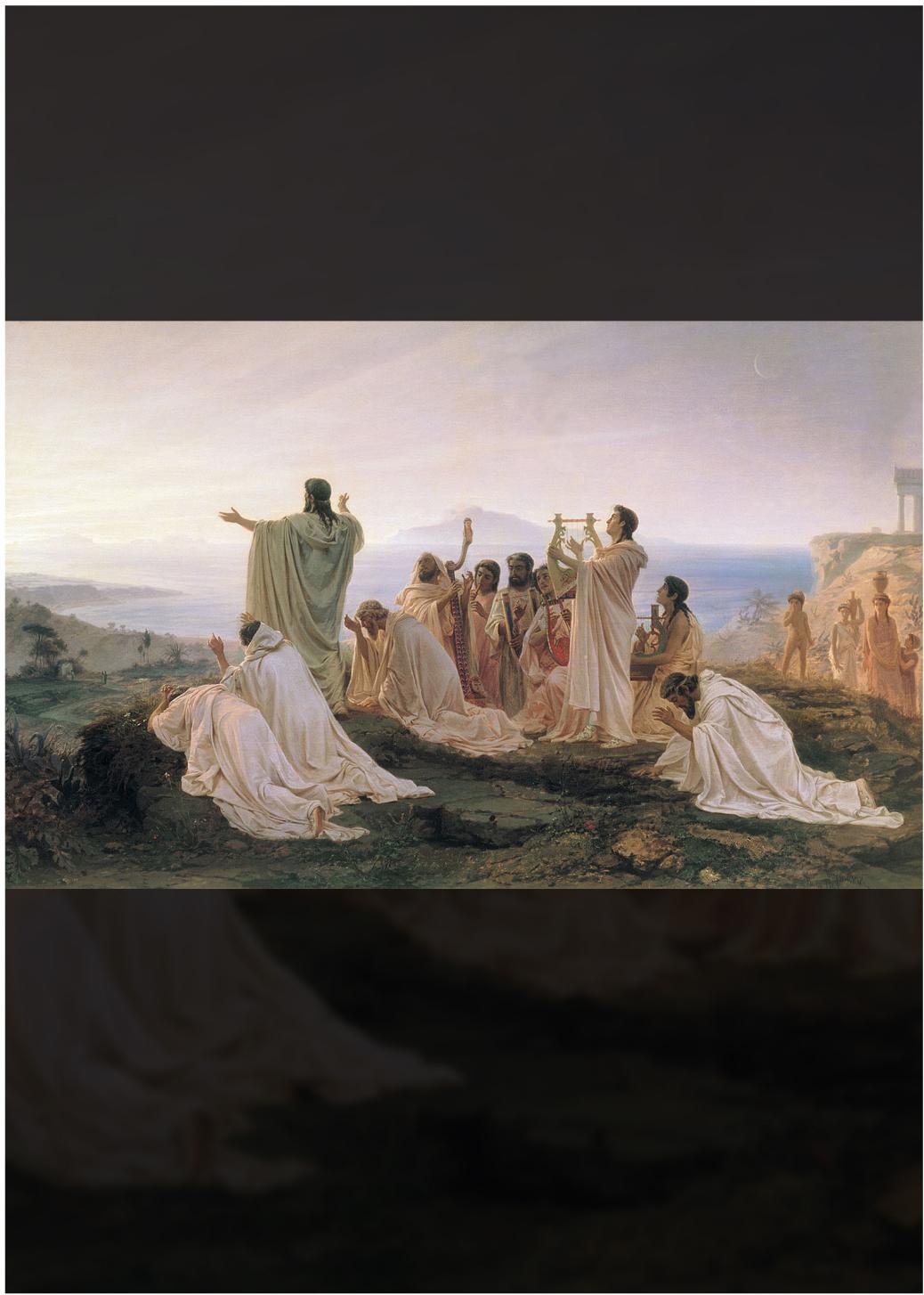
of the belief system.

On one hand, I think he had a fantastic message, barring some exceptions. I think his teachings have given countless people comfort during desperate times in their lives. I think 99% of people would see an improvement in their lives if they strictly followed the absolutely beautiful ethical doctrine laid out by Pythagoras.

It's the supernatural part I have a problem with. My question is: why can't the powerful ethical message stand by its laurels alone? Why are all the miracles, supernatural events, and magical thinking necessary? We have absolutely zero rational basis for believing in this stuff, and while I have no doubt it must feel comforting to feel like you have the wind of God's will at your back as you navigate life, I can't help but think that having a god is nothing more than an incentive for lazy people to stay disciplined, or else. Pythagoras, in this interpretation, is nothing more than a perpetual NSA agent watching your every move.

**"Let no one persuade you by word or deed to do or say whatever is not best for you."**

In any event, there was something truly special about Pythagoras. As I alluded to before, he wasn't the only guy back then who was getting supernatural magic tricks tacked onto his resume. On the contrary, there were dozens of people back then reportedly "walking on water" for lack of a better example. What made so many people flock to Pythagoras as opposed to any of the other potential deities? What made Pythagoras special?



**Only the best cult leaders have followers as loyal as the Pythagoreans. Painting depicting loyal Pythagoreans celebrating one of their beloved celestial spheres rising over the mountains by Fyodor Bronnikov.**

To put it shortly, Pythagoras brought something to the average person that no one had ever seen before, and the mystery and potential surrounding the entire trip he was embarking on drove people into a frenzy. What made Pythagoras so special was that he was able to look around him and bring an unprecedented level of clarity to a previously uncertain world using numbers and mathematics.

The famous axiom of the Pythagoreans was,

**“Number is the ruler of forms and ideas, and the cause of gods and daemons.”**

Imagine yourself in the shoes of someone living 2500 years ago. When you were confused about the cause of something in the natural world, there was no Wikipedia back then. If you were confused about why sometimes ships sail on the ocean and everything's perfectly fine and other times a monstrous, violent storm rips the boat to shreds, you had two possible choices. You could remain a confused sheep, or you could believe the explanation that a supernatural God caused that storm because he was angry at them for some transgression-- maybe the sailors forgot to tell the Gods how great they were that day. (As you probably well know, low self-esteem is a constant battle when you're an all-powerful god. You need that reinforcement daily, or else you can't promise bad things aren't going to happen).

Anyway, philosophy arose out of the hope for this possibility: maybe we could use reason to arrive at an explanation for these mysteries instead of fables or stories. Fun fact: Pythagoras is actually the guy that initially came up with the word philosopher. It was a combination of two words: “sophia,” meaning love and “philo,” meaning wisdom. To be someone living during

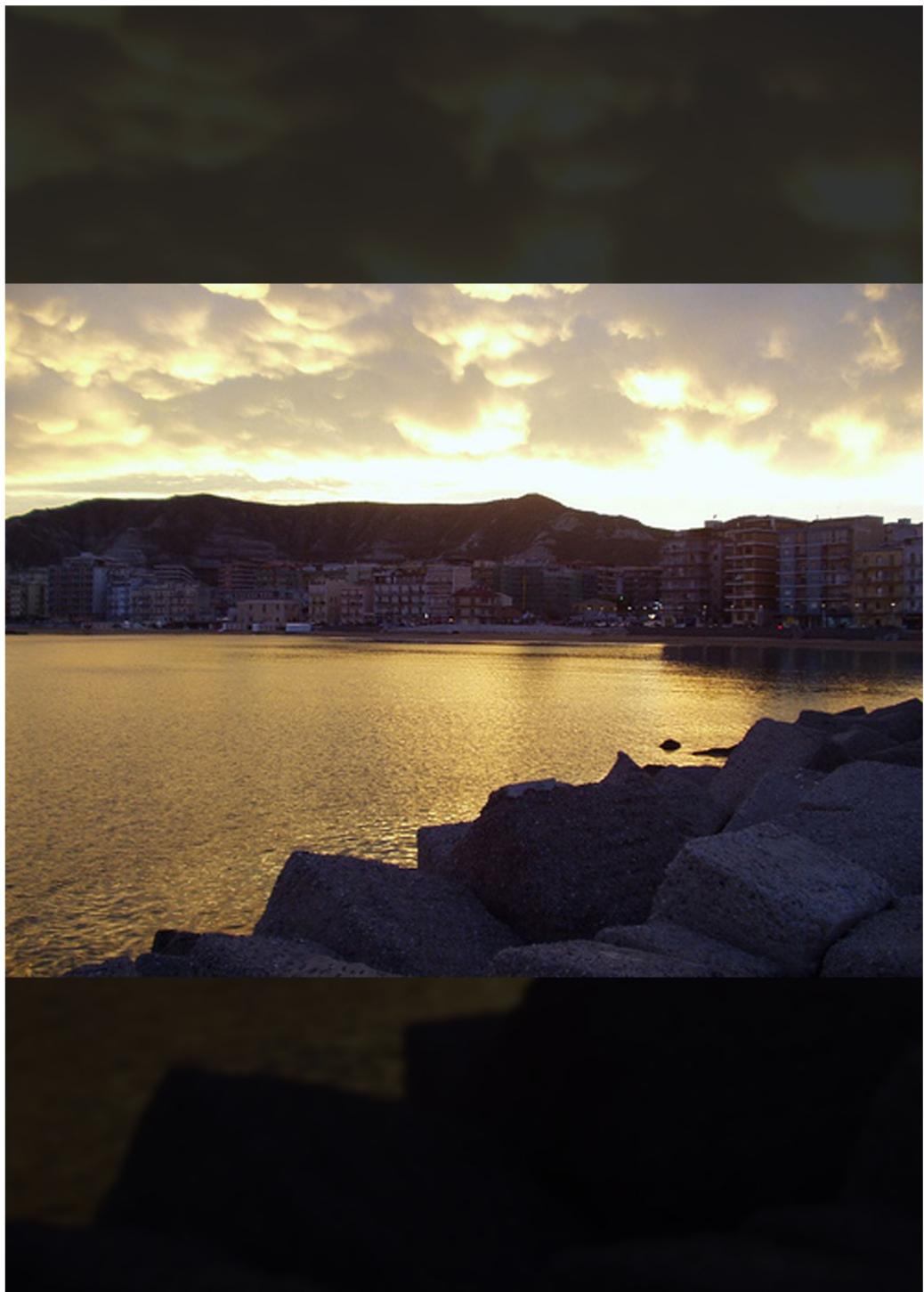
this time period who was unwilling to accept the religious narrative, you were not only seen as a “lover of wisdom,” but as a foot soldier on this battlefield who was volunteering to live in a pretty scary world—a world of almost total ignorance about the causes and effects of things around you.

Put yourself in the shoes of these people living in 500 BC. You don’t have the benefit of a public school system with science class every year. You don’t have the benefit of the internet. You don’t have the benefit of science documentaries on Netflix on a moment’s notice. You are faced with the hard reality of looking around you in every direction at the majesty of the natural world and feeling clueless—as clueless as you felt the first time your parents took you to the petting zoo. It must have been a terrifying feeling.

So when you’re beginning from that psychological starting point and Pythagoras comes along and tells you that he’s counted the numbers up, and that the square of the two shorter sides of a triangle equals the square of the hypotenuse—that would be pretty awesome.

But when Pythagoras tells you that this is a universal, irrefutable law of the universe that can never be wrong and that it applies to every triangle that has ever been drawn and will ever be drawn—that must have seemed like sorcery.

Pythagoras bringing this unprecedented level of clarity to a previously uncertain and volatile world must have seemed like magic to someone living in 500 BC.



**Are you a megalomaniac cult leader looking for a place to settle down and start your life of indoctrination? Then the beautiful waterfront of Croton is the perfect place for you! It really is stunningly gorgeous though.**

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Before they became Pythagoreans, they existed in this giant, mysterious, seemingly-inconceivable universe that they knew nothing about, and along comes Pythagoras with this new incredible way to understand one little piece of it. It must have felt like a savior delivering them from ignorance. It must have felt like at once they were blind, but now they could see.

From the moment Pythagoras started gathering followers, it wasn't long until they created a legacy. The Pythagoreans saw the fields of math, music, and astronomy as three types of inquiry that were remarkably similar, regardless of how different they may appear on the surface. They believed that numbers and mathematical relationships between things would eventually reveal all the mysteries of the universe. I could spend a lifetime writing about the influence of the Pythagoreans and their hundreds of insights that shaped subsequent mathematics, but the biggest lesson I take from Pythagoras has to do with human behavior—that simply by bringing people a little bit of clarity, you can convince them that you are God. This is why I started my podcast.



**Medieval depiction of Pythagoras glorifying his fascination with spheres and their importance in the universe. It also glorifies the use of performance enhancing drugs.  
No one had a chest like that in Medieval times.**

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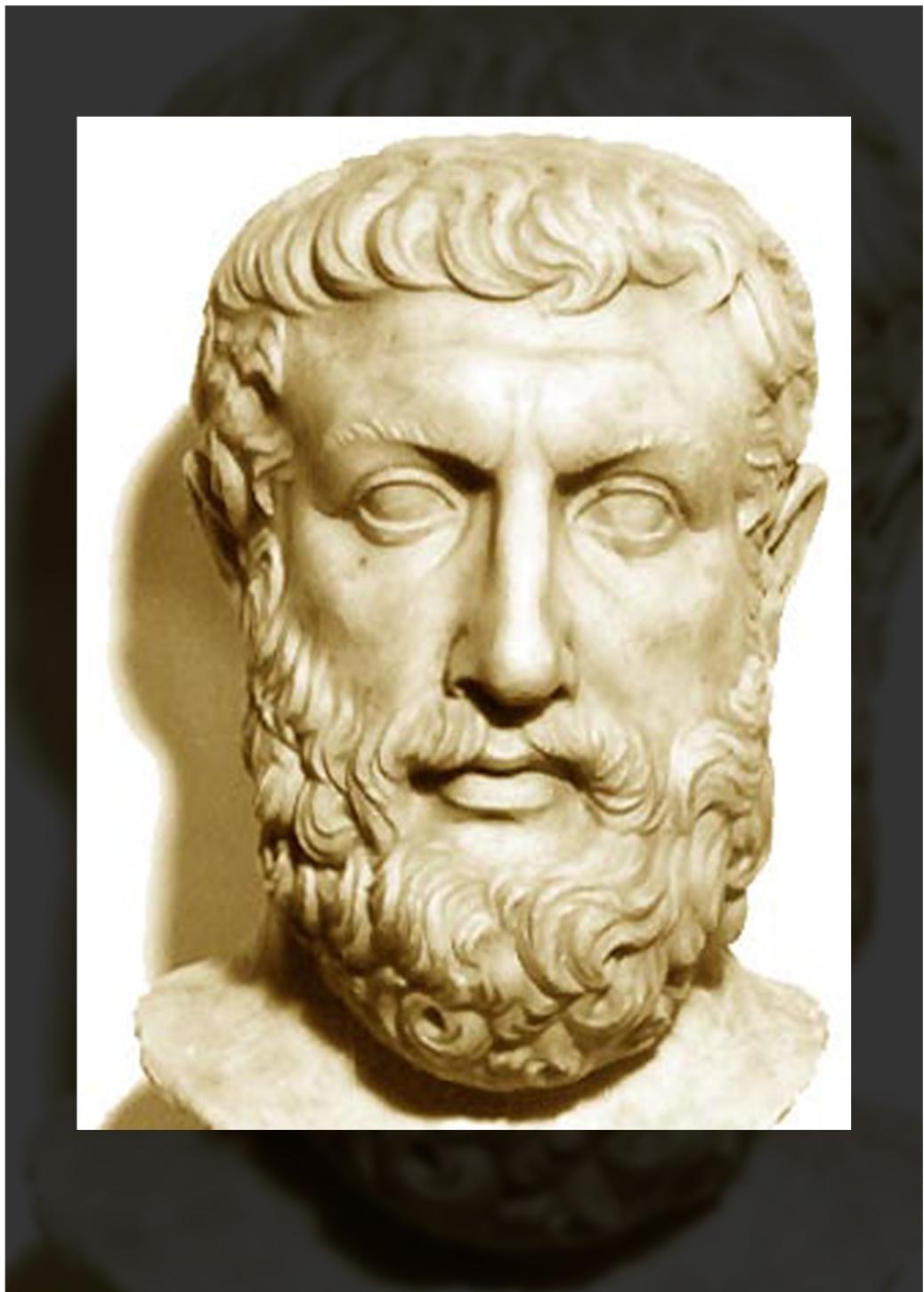
CHAPTER

# 5

PARMENIDES

...  
*"It is indifferent to me where I am to begin,  
for there shall I return again."*

- Parmenides



**Parmenides (515 BC - 460 BC)**

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**“It is indifferent to me where I am to begin, for there shall I return again.”**

If all of the Pre-Socratics we've talked about so far were sitting around having a dinner party, Parmenides is the guy they'd all be talking badly about as soon as he left the room to go to the bathroom.

You can't blame them for being a little upset with the guy. For generations, all the Pre-Socratics had been thinking about the universe under a very narrow, assumed set of parameters that none of them had ever really questioned. The universe was created by something. The universe is made out of something. There is some order to this universe that makes motion and change and substance possible. As long as you're willing to accept these assumptions, it sets you up for some pretty cool conversations. It set the Pre-Socratics up for a pretty wide variety of cool explanations, but no single explanation really stood out that much.

But Parmenides was different. This multi-century shell game that the Pre-Socratics had been playing wasn't good enough for him. He wanted to make some real progress in philosophy. For all the talking these guys were doing about their intentions of finding the truth about the universe, they sure weren't getting very far.

His thinking was: if these guys are spending their entire lives trying to arrive at the answer to a single question, and they still never end up agreeing on anything or coming up with anything conclusive, there can only be one explanation. There must be some fundamental problem with the way they're thinking about stuff.

I hate to spoil the ending, but the idea that Parmenides came up with shook the foundations of philosophy. It was the equivalent of forcing philosophy to put its head on a baseball bat, put the baseball bat on the ground and spin around in a circle a hundred times.

To Parmenides, the reason all these guys that came before him ended up getting nowhere is that they were looking for answers in the wrong place. They spent their entire lives trying to explain what seemed to be intuitive; they were trying to come up with explanations for how the world came into existence and why events in the natural world occurred.

Parmenides went the other direction: he spent his entire life arguing why it is logically impossible for the world to have ever come into existence in the first place and how none of these events in the natural world were really happening at all. To Parmenides, true reality was a single, spherical unchanging blob of existence, and the changes we think we see, hear, smell or touch, is nothing more than an illusion. If the last few sentences were too dense or complex, Parmenides breaks his worldview down for people like me into very simple terms, “What is, is. What is not, is not.”

Parmenides said that whenever we talk about something that doesn’t exist, regardless of how real it seems in our heads, we are really talking about nothing. You could wax poetic for hours about a unicorn with its sleek, shiny coat and its single horn resembling an orange creamsicle prancing through a field of daffodils, and Parmenides would say that all you are really doing over that hour of talking is making meaningless noise. (Well, that, and making your parents very disappointed that you relapsed on some pretty crazy drugs.)

Parmenides thought that it was impossible for something to exist and not

exist at the same time. When you're talking about a unicorn prancing through a field, what are you really thinking about? Can you point to or identify or touch or feel that unicorn? The answer is no. In this sense, you aren't talking about anything that's real, so to even speak about it is to be talking about nothing to Parmenides. Any words that you say about nothing is talking about nothing and is ultimately just you babbling meaninglessly. He sees it as a contradiction to talk about these things.

From this premise he argues that in order for something to change, it first needs to be one way and then change into the other way. Seems pretty straight forward. But to Parmenides, as we now know from the prior example, it's a contradiction to speak of things that don't exist yet! So to speak of any sort of change is also a contradiction.



**Something cannot come from nothing. There can be no void. Only a single, unchanging, motionless, eternal blob of existence that must resemble a sphere. Kind of like me the day after I release a podcast episode.**

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The conclusion he arrives at is that change as we perceive it is a complete illusion. It may seem like things are changing, but we know from the previously established rules he's laid out that this is nonsense.

He uses this argument to claim several other things. Motion is impossible, because in order for something to change position it had to have been at a different position before that. The concepts of birth and death must also be an illusion because nothing can ever come or go out of being. Even the universe itself wasn't impervious to this argument; Parmenides thought there was never a beginning to the universe because there could have never been a point in time that the universe didn't exist, because what is, is and what is not, is not.

If this is starting to blend together and sound like a boring failed hypothesis by primitive man to explain the universe, calm down. I realize you might be scoffing at this point, and it would be very tempting to write off everything else this guy has to say. But there are interesting things to think about from the way Parmenides looked at the world, which if you haven't already guessed, was much different than the way you or I look at the world. Just consider for a second that he lived on the same planet we do, with the same basic bio-chemical makeup we have, and contrast the way he saw his existence with the way you see yours:

**“There is one story left, one road: that it is. And on this road there are very many signs that, being, is uncreated and imperishable, whole, unique, unwavering, and complete.”**

To Parmenides, the universe is one eternal, unchanging, massive blob with no empty space inside that is not unlike a perfect sphere, which the Greeks

considered at the time to be the most perfect of all the geometric forms.

Parmenides doesn't deny the appearance of the world around him. He doesn't think you're an idiot for seeing the obvious contradictions between seeing things move and change and his belief that none of it is really happening. And if for some reason you still feel like your personal view is being attacked, try to find some solace by considering how Parmenides must have felt looking at the world the way he did.

Every morning he woke up, didn't brush his teeth, and gallivanted around a world that he thought was a complete illusion. Oh, that rock flying at your head? That isn't really happening, it's your senses deceiving you. That crazed ax murderer on your doorstep wearing a KFC bucket on his head; that's all smoke and mirrors. How crazy must life be if you truly walked around believing that you were hallucinating everything, with zero chance of seeing reality as it truly was? I don't think Hemingway could've foreshadowed the future questions of philosophy better than Parmenides did.

That said, Parmenides still falls into the category of philosophers that we don't fully understand. In the sporadic fragments we do have of Parmenides, one thing that seems very clear is that he didn't hold our senses in very high regard. In fact, it seems clear he thought they were next to useless. To Parmenides, we shouldn't rely so heavily on what we see or hear as a guide to understanding the world, but our ability to reason should be what we consider the most.



To Parmenides, every action has an equal or opposite reaction that really doesn't matter anyway because it's all an illusion.

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If you're anything like me, what Parmenides is saying here seems much easier said than done. Not trusting our senses is easy in some cases. It's easy if you're in the middle of the desert dying of heat stroke and you see a geyser of grape soda shooting out of the sand—it's easy to admit that is an illusion. But consider doing that with everything around you!

**“You must learn all things, both the unshaken heart of persuasive truth, and the opinions of mortals in which there is no true warranty.”**

As far as I'm concerned you can look at Parmenides in one of two ways. You can see him as a silly, ape-like Pre-Socratic philosopher who was scientifically ignorant and used this extreme conclusion as a philosophical crutch so that he didn't have to examine anything any deeper.

Or you can see him as I do: a brilliant thinker who was incredibly ahead of his time and embodies a spirit that I have no doubt everyone reading this book values as well: a commitment to the process, not the immediate appearance of the results.

Think of the sacrifice Parmenides made in the name of his beliefs. He lived his entire life committed to the idea that everything he saw around him at some level was false. Literally every single thing he encountered living his daily life told him that this belief he had was not true, yet he relentlessly persisted. Parmenides recognized something all those years ago; he recognized that the truth is not always what our senses tell us it is. He recognized that if you are conducting an experiment—whether you're a scientist or just an individual trying to make your way through life—sometimes we need to be willing to accept the results of an experiment

regardless of whether it seems immediately rational.

In an age where corrupted scientists sometimes conduct biased experiments for the sake of profit, in an age where so many people spend their entire lives not seeking truth, but desperately trying to validate what they already think they know, how many of us would be better off if we all took a page out of the book of Parmenides? Truth is sometimes contrary to what we perceive, and Parmenides believed this so adamantly that he was willing to live his entire life in what he believed was a perpetual mirage in the desert. What are you willing to do in the name of seeking the truth?

CHAPTER

# 6

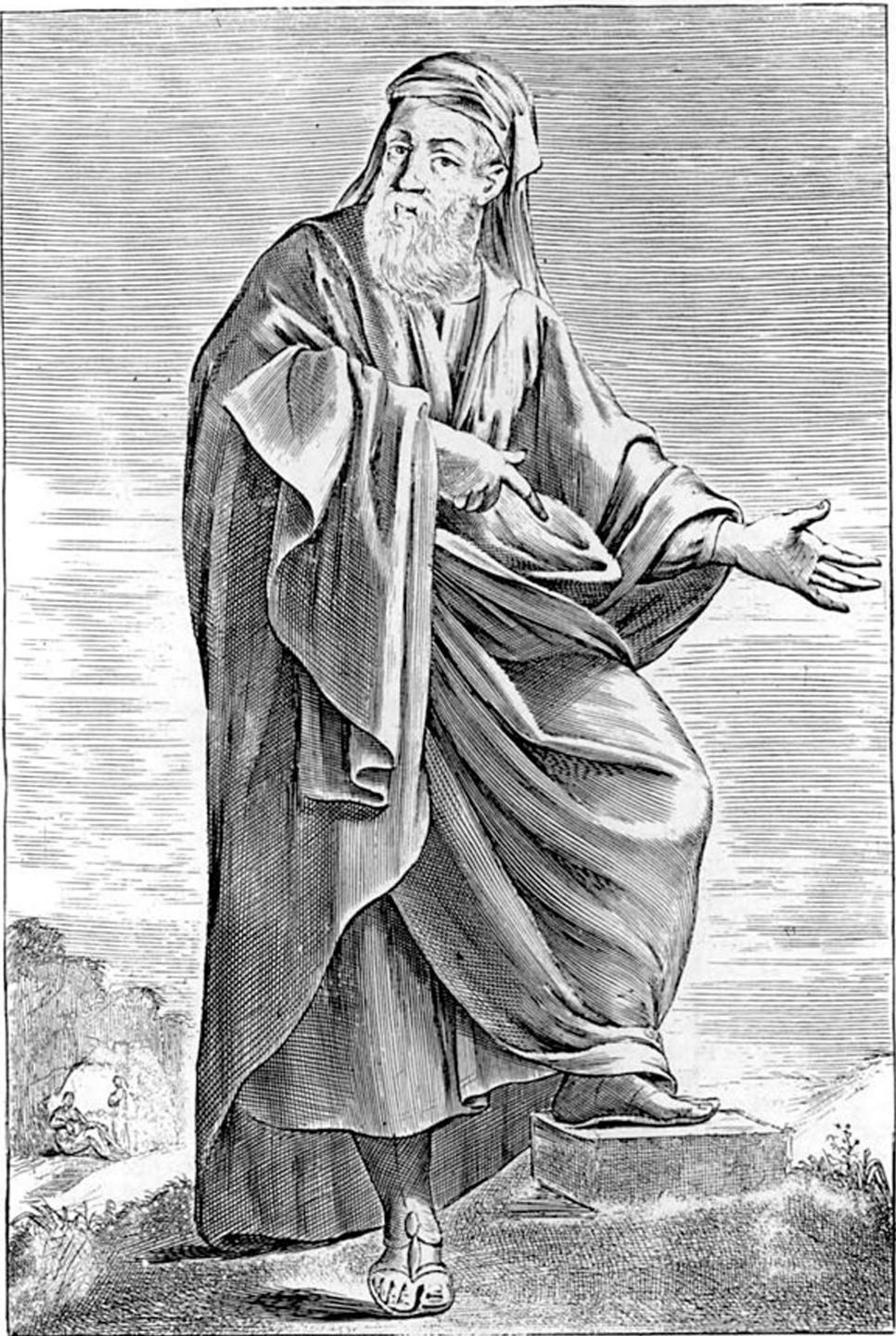
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EMPEDOCLES

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...  
“Blessed is he who has acquired a wealth of divine wisdom,  
but miserable is he in whom there rests a dim  
opinion concerning the gods.”

- Empedocles



**Empedocles (490 BC to 430 BC)**

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**“Blessed is he who has acquired a wealth of divine wisdom, but miserable is he in whom there rests a dim opinion concerning the gods.”**

There are lessons to take from the life and conviction of Parmenides, but I'd be lying if I didn't say that his ideas were a little extreme at times. The whole “single, fixed, unchanging blob of existence” thing turned some people off to him. But the good news is that his ideas didn't fall into obscurity, never to be heard from again. Tons of philosophers that came after him saw the genius diamond in the rough. They took the good things he said, removed the depressing stuff, and created a patchwork of ideas that was much more palatable to the average person living at the time. Empedocles is the next chapter in this book because he was one of the philosophers who did this.

Empedocles was a piece of work. This guy not only philosophized, but he looked good doing it too. And by looking good, I mean he looked completely outrageous. He had everything you'd expect from a charismatic philosopher after having read the first part of this book. He claimed to be a god among men. He claimed to be immortal. He claimed these powers were bestowed upon him as a reward for his long life of extensive thought. But this guy took the whole charismatic philosopher thing to an entirely different level; he revolutionized the visual component of being a maniac.

He would walk around everywhere in a ridiculous getup: a purple robe, a giant golden belt, bronze shoes, and a wreath around his head like he was the Delphic oracle. But let's make one thing clear: this guy wasn't crazy and just oblivious to how ridiculous he looked; he did all of this stuff for very calculated, specific reasons. He talked about how when he walked through a new town, his main goal was to catch everyone's eye, and have them pause in confusion for a moment as to who this crazy guy was and why he was in their town. Then, hopefully their confusion would turn to intrigue, and they'd follow him around by the thousands to see what he's all about. Here's the really mind-blowing part: it worked. Who's the crazy one now?

**“This is not lawful for some and unlawful for others, but what is lawful for all extends on continuously through the wide-ruling air and the boundless light.”**

His guerrilla marketing scheme may have gotten people's attention, but it takes more than a nice smile and bronze shoes to keep people around listening to your message. What Empedocles did was quite simple actually—he told the people a story. See, as you know, Empedocles was a god. And part of the divine wisdom that was bestowed upon him was knowledge of a time long ago; a time when all humans lived happily together with endless love for each other; a time when the world was completely devoid of turmoil. This is genius, by the way. What a powerful tool the past is when there aren't any history books for people to prove you wrong with! When Empedocles stood on his podium and told the people of this tranquil bygone age, they loved it. They were captivated by it. And that's when Empedocles hit them with the bad news.

Empedocles always gave the bad news first. The bad news was that in the beginning all men were gods. Each and every person listening in his audience at one point was a god, but they had lost their immortal status and were put here on earth. Bad news indeed.

But there was good news! The good news was that they all had the ability to become gods again—all they needed to do was just be more like Empedocles!

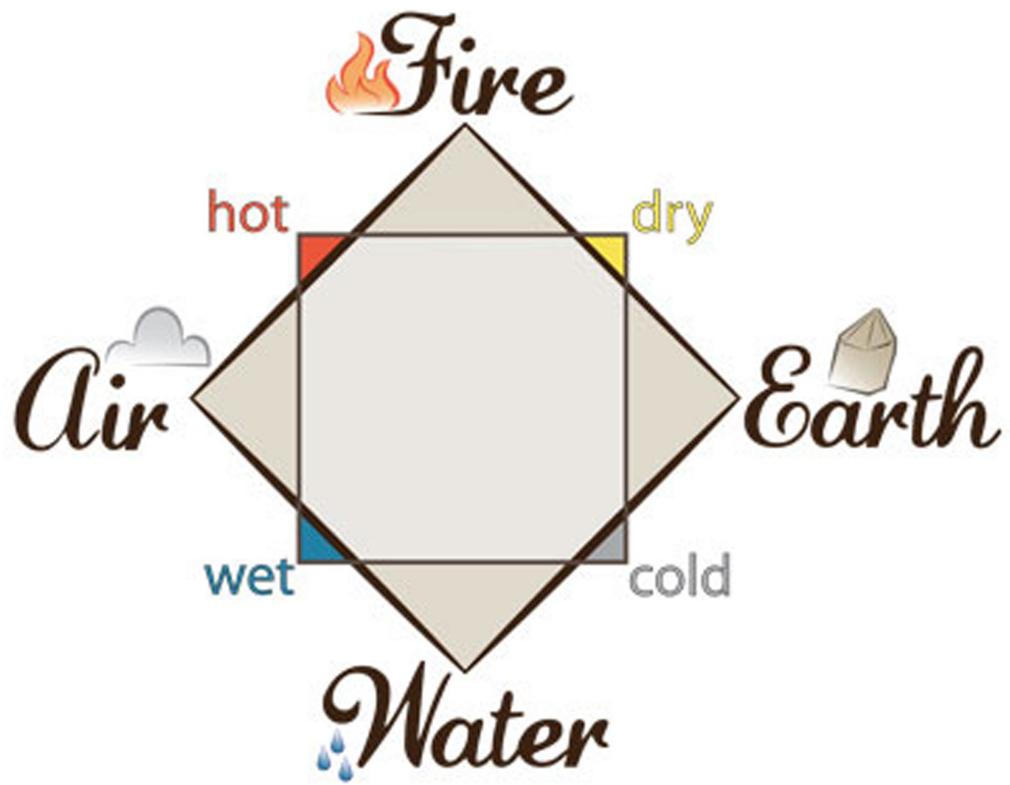
When Parmenides made the extreme claim that the universe is eternal and that nothing ever changes or is created or destroyed, obviously he was faced with the question of how we explain all the things around us that seem like they're changing. Empedocles can be thought of as someone who offered up a pretty ingenious answer to this question.

Empedocles largely agreed with Parmenides that change as we perceive it was not actually happening. He sets up his argument by saying that everything in the universe at its most fundamental level is made up of four elements: air, water, fire and earth. Everything that exists is either exclusively one of these four or is some conglomeration of two or more of them.

Empedocles would say that if you're going for a walk in the woods and you come across a rock, what you're looking at is nature's masterful combination of different amounts of these elements. A mixture of ingredients. A celestial baked good!

The point that Empedocles would drive to is that if you took a jackhammer and crushed that rock into a hundred pieces or even ground it down into the finest powder you could possibly make, that rock doesn't cease to exist. The ingredients that comprise that rock don't magically disappear, they just move on and become a part of something else.

The significance of this is huge. To the casual viewer, the rock itself may appear to change, but the elements that make up the rock are not actually undergoing change in any real sense. The only thing they can be said to be doing is changing their configuration. When compared to the theory of atomism, which proposed something very similar, we can see the genius of Empedocles.



**Earth, Fire, Wind, Water, Heart! By your powers combined: I am Empedocles!**

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Atoms don't come or go out of existence just because the things they assemble come or go out of existence. For example, when I die, my body will actually continue to exist for a long time! Immediately after I die, I won't vanish into thin air—I'll still be around. My body will probably lie on the couch for a few weeks. Off the top of my head, I can't think of who would ever visit me and find my dead body; I guess eventually a bill collector or a census agent would come to my door and peek inside before the raccoons have finished consuming me. It's not like I cease to exist when my family throws my remains in the trunk of their station wagon and takes me to the morgue where they can get the paperwork to cash the insurance check! No, Empedocles would say it would be nonsense to think that way.

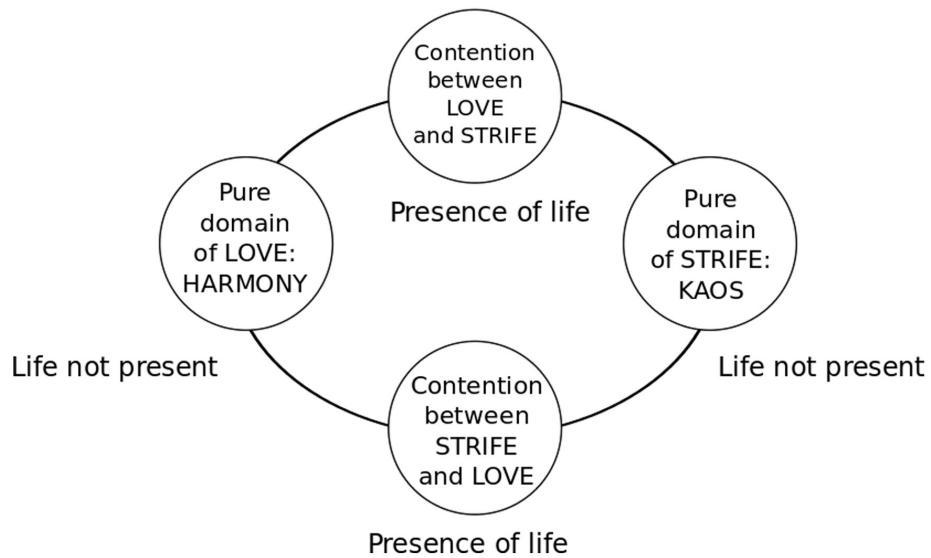
My family, being as prudent and frugal as they are, would probably opt to go for the “economy pack” at the morgue, which I hear consists of them tying a couple cinder blocks around my ankles and dropping me in the nearest lake. But even after thousands of years of being eaten by fish and worms at the bottom of that lake, the fundamental matter that makes up my body still does not cease to exist.

Every atom that made up my body will have been eventually passed on to something else. Though what I call “I” died long ago and “left existence,” the atoms that made up my body never left existence. When you consider yourself in these terms, the claim of Parmenides that death is a human created illusion that we shouldn’t fear starts to sound a little less crazy.

Unfortunately for Empedocles and everyone else who has ever worn bronze shoes and a wreath around their head, he was never that far removed from crazy. He clung to sanity for a while there, but it was inevitable; he was going to lose it eventually. In the end, he believed his own immortality hype so much that he jumped into an active volcano. Before you go getting all judgmental, just ask yourself one question: will the way you die even come close to being as cool as the way Empedocles died?

Anyway, before he fell into the fires of Mt. Doom, Empedocles had one more problem to tackle as a result of all these big claims he was making. People would ask him the question: if the universe is eternal and made up of these unchanging four elements, how do you explain why they are moving and interacting with each other in the first place?

## Empedocles cosmic cycle



The relationship between the presence of life with the constant cosmic battle between Love and Strife.

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This is a good question. Why is everything moving around as opposed to standing still? Surely, there's no necessary reason why in the very beginning these four elements would be moving and interacting as opposed to merely suspended, motionless in space.

Empedocles says that this is yet another piece of divine wisdom that was bestowed upon him (being a god and all). This mystery can be explained by a vicious cyclical war that's been going on since the beginning of time—a fiery cosmic war between the force of Love and the force of Strife. John Freely talks about Empedocles here:

**"He tried to address the problem of change by saying that there is not one fundamental arche but four—earth, water, air, and fire—which generate all the material substances in nature by mixing together in various ways under the influence of forces he called Love and Strife."**

**- John Freely**

Throw in some LSD, and this probably would have gone over fantastically at Woodstock '69, but for everyone else this is going to take a little explaining on my end. Empedocles says that in the beginning, Love reigned supreme. Every speck of all four of the elements were densely huddled together in the center of the universe like penguins in the antarctic. The force of Love wrapped around them like a protective cocoon, binding them together. But then the force of Strife started attacking Love. At first Love was able to resist, but eventually Strife began to win, and the elements started to seep out of this dense huddle. Eventually, the elements were strewn all over the universe.

But Love still had some fight left in it. Love regrouped and started fighting back against Strife, and as a result the elements started grouping back together again. The things that we see in our everyday existence—things like mountains and trees and iPhones—these are all individual examples of these small quantities of elements that are grouped together by the force of Love.

Empedocles thinks the current world we exist in is not a tranquil place at all, but in fact a fiery battleground between the forces of Love and Strife. Love combines the elements into something like a human, and then Strife tears them apart and makes them into ashes. The reconfiguration of the elements and all the various forms they take can really be explained by this war that

we are inexorably involved in, and in a strange way, the battlefield on which it's being fought. Empedocles says that eventually, many years down the road, one of them, either Love or Strife, will reign supreme and the entire process will start over again.

**“These [elements] never cease changing place continually, now being all united by Love into one, now each borne apart by the hatred engendered of Strife, until they are brought together in the unity of the all, and become subject to it.”**

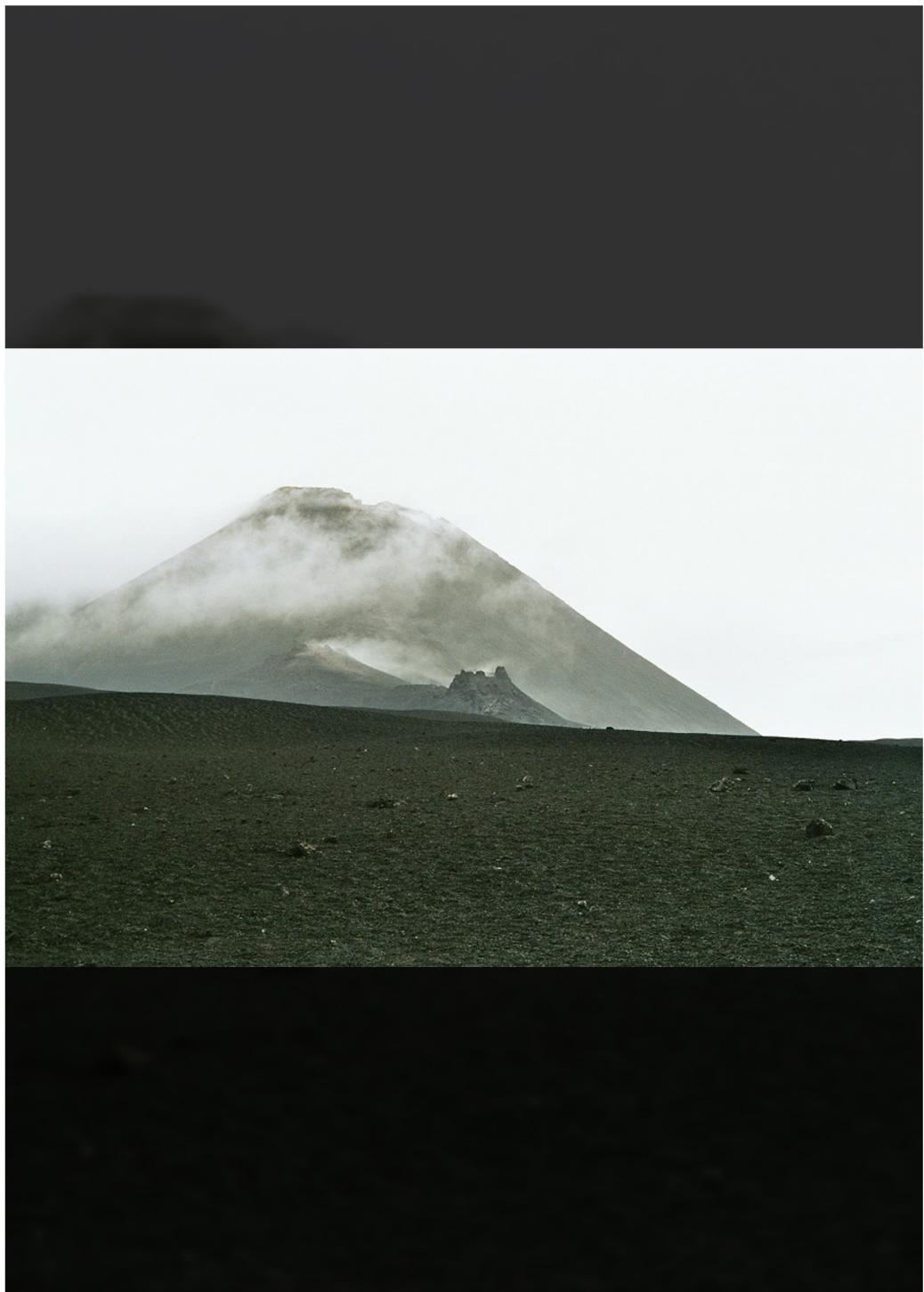
Wow, what a fantastic story. It's so fantastic, I'm going to spend the next forty or so pages hashing out the details and expanding on exactly what Empedocles meant by this eternal cosmic battle that we're all a part of!

I'm kidding. I'm not actually going to do that. Don't get me wrong, there are plenty of interesting directions I could go with the battle of Love and Strife, but to be completely honest, I'm getting tired of talking about fairy tales.

Call me a lightweight, but I can only handle small doses of fictitious cosmic battles and gods walking among men. I can't be the only one. There has to be a significant portion of people reading this book that are tired of reading about unverifiable speculation.

Where's the argumentative element of philosophy? Where's the critical thinking? When do we stop talking about fantasy worlds and start trying to use our brains to get to the thing were all here for: the truth?

Fear not my fellow truth-seekers, because the people back then felt the exact same feelings that you're feeling right now. We had tons of great stories; what we needed was a heavy dose of scrutinization. And there may not be a more notorious group of scrutinizers than the group we're going to talk about next: The Sophists.



Mt. Etna. The volcano Empedocles is said to have jumped into. I wonder if he contemplated on the way down whether the lava that was about to consume him was more fire or water?

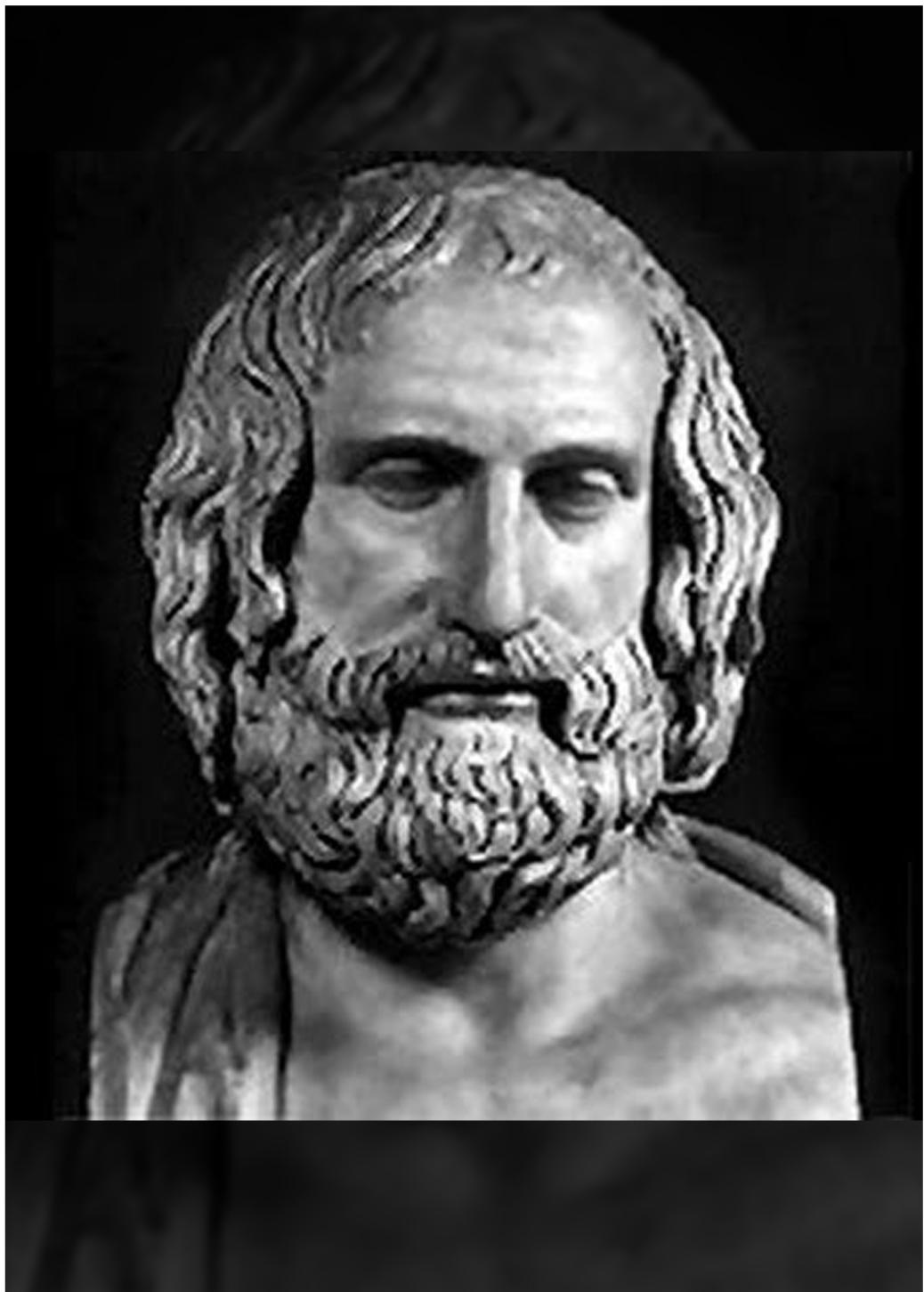
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CHAPTER



THE SOPHISTS

...  
*"There are two sides to every question."*  
- Protagoras



Protagoras (490 BC - 420 BC)

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**“There are two sides to every question.”**

Being a lover of history, people often ask me the generic “time machine” question: “If you had a time machine, and you could go back to any point in history, which one would you choose?”

I always answer, “Around 10 seconds ago, before you wasted my time with that stupid question!”

I don’t really ever say that, but the flaw in the question is obvious. Let’s say I could go back to 9th century Baghdad or to the coliseum to see Rome at its height; it’s one of those things that sounds great in theory, but in practice would end up being pretty terrible.

Firstly, I would look like an alien to the general population dressed in my cotton/polyester t-shirt and denim jeans. I wouldn’t be able to understand what anyone around me was saying; in fact, I’d probably assume they were all talking badly about me like I normally do, except this time I wouldn’t even be able to verify whether they were or not.

Most of the food would be terrible (depending on the setting and culture, obviously). People would smell terrible. And what if my time machine malfunctioned? I couldn’t survive back then! I would be hopeless! I would be like a domesticated animal released into the wild. What would I do for a living? Dance around like a monkey making jokes about Socrates? These people would find out I was nuts, I’d probably get my head lopped off, and I don’t even want to think about what Caligula would do with a time machine at his disposal.

The better question to ask a lover of history is, “If you could be reborn into a particular time period and region, which would you choose?”

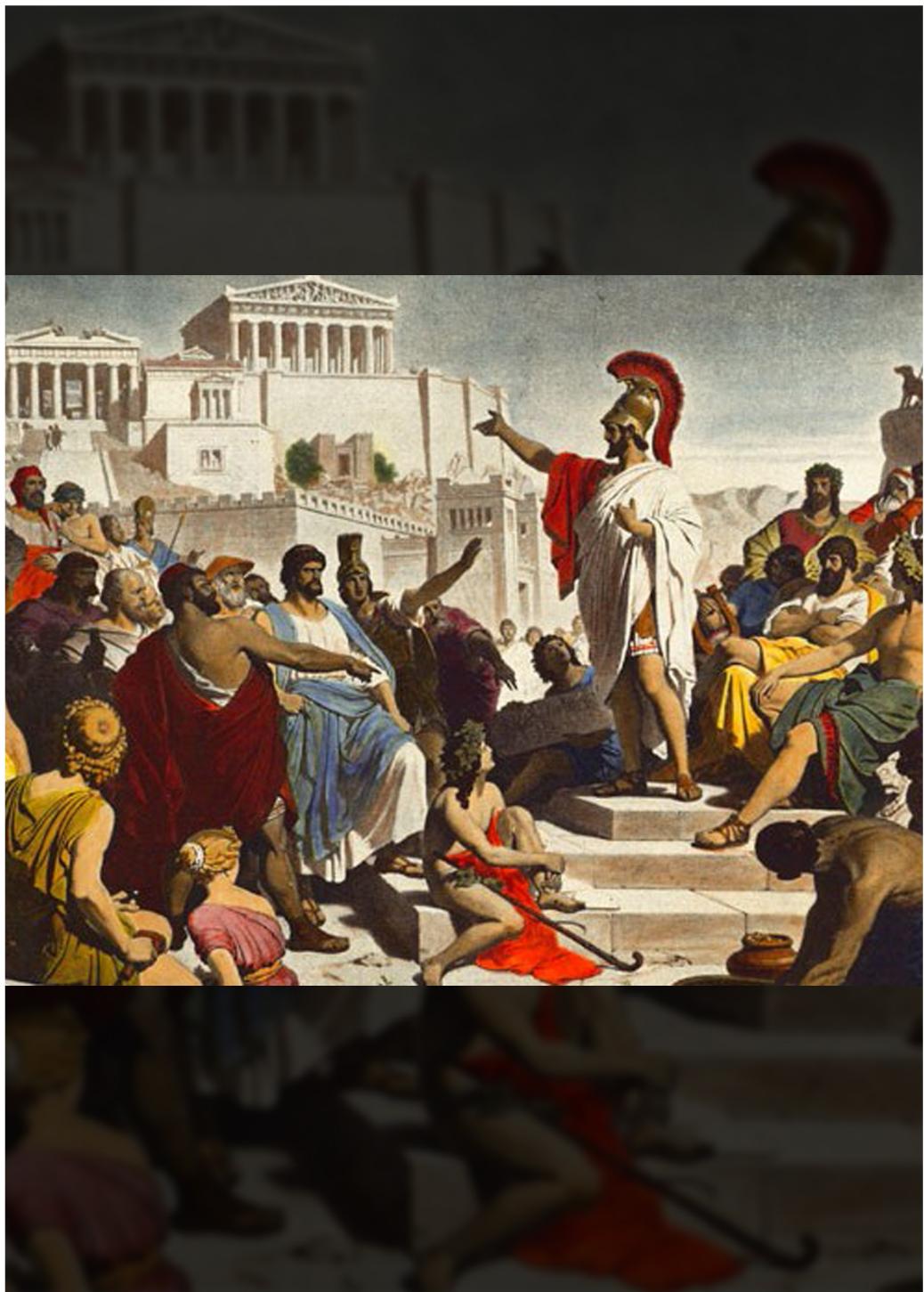
Well, I’d like to make it clear that I fully appreciate the time and place I’m living in. Just consider how much the average American makes and the efficiency of those wages, the rate of infant mortality, the rate of technological innovation, the ease of transportation, and the availability of clean water, food, medication, safe shelter, and endless information (not to mention the accessibility of endless entertainment and an entire planet full of artisans). A king living at any point in time more than fifty years ago

couldn't have dreamt of the level of luxury that's available to every American citizen today who is physically capable of working for minimum wage.

I am the furthest thing from someone who resents the time period he's living in and naively wishes to be living in "the good old days."

That said, if I could choose to be born into an earlier generation, my first choice would be the baby boomer generation (because I can at least be confident that a nuclear holocaust isn't going to happen), and my second choice would be Athens during the middle of the fifth century BC. Of course we history lovers could argue about this all day, but personally I can't think of any other time or place more interesting or innovative.

This really was a special time in the history of western culture because there were massive changes going on. There was enormous growth and prosperity all throughout the region, and people flocked from all over the globe in a pre-flight world just to become a part of it. At this point, the city of Athens was right in between the Persian and Peloponnesian wars, so it was a relatively peaceful time for its citizens. But the icing on the cake for the people of Athens during this short time period was that the man in charge of their city was perhaps one of the greatest leaders and statesmen in the history of the world. His name was Pericles.



**Artistic depiction of Pericles during the most golden age in the history of Athens.  
Can you imagine our leaders being that accessible?**

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Pericles was so good, people still talk about him today. I remember reading an article written during the brief period of financial prosperity the United States experienced during the 1990's in which the author suggested that the prosperity was so short-lived because we needed a leader like Pericles to grab ahold of that nugget of gold with both hands. My point is that Pericles' leadership, combined with the ingenuity of brilliant people, brought Athens into a golden age that was so good, people refer to it as one of the most golden of any golden age in the history of the world.

But no matter how golden of an age you're living in, people are always going to have problems. People will always need entertainment of some sort to give them a bit of a respite from the toils of everyday life. Even kings need court jesters. In modern society, this might be the easiest thing in the world. Finding something entertaining to distract you away from your problems is the least of your worries.

The overwhelming majority of people living in first world countries have nearly infinite options when it comes to choosing how they want to distract themselves. Consider for a second that at a moment's notice, you can have almost anything. You can have hundreds of channels constantly competing with each other for your attention. You can have video games that took a team of developers and artists months of slave labor to create in the hope that you'd play them. You can even sit on your couch at home and watch professional athletes, who have been running laps and physically exerting themselves all week long strictly for your viewing pleasure. And don't even get me started on the internet! When it comes to finding entertainment, we have it pretty good in modern times—but it wasn't always this easy.

Even in the most golden of golden ages, people struggled to find things to direct their attention to during times of recreation, but if you were a citizen of ancient Athens, there was one thing you loved. There was one thing that never failed to get you riled up, and that was a good court case. These people would have loved Judge Judy!

In a way it's understandable that they'd love court cases; there was so much at stake, and imagine how scandalous it must have been! Back then, if someone took you to court for something, and things didn't go particularly well, it could affect the outcome of your entire life. Also consider how different these court cases would have looked compared to our modern

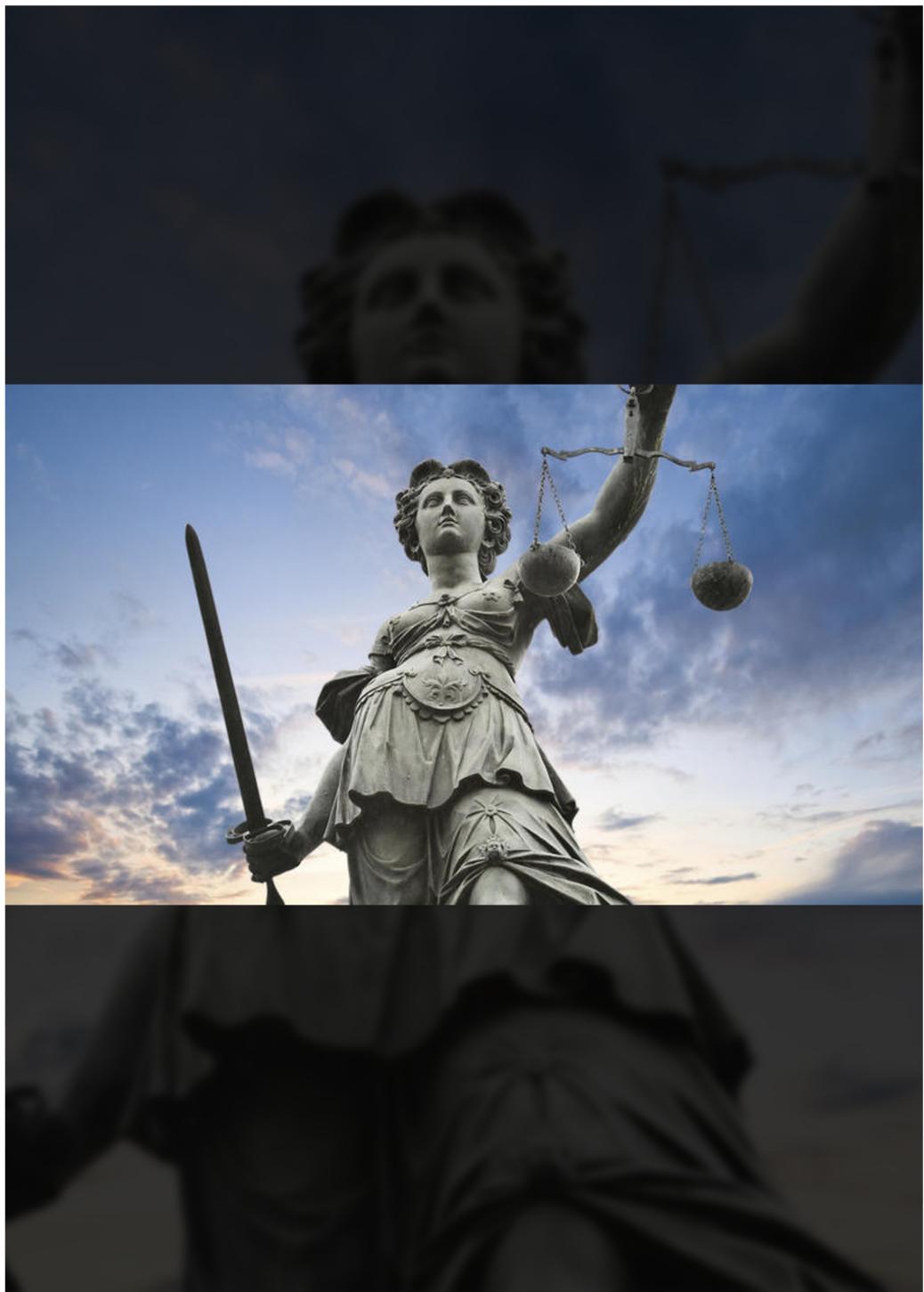
system! Back then, language and critical thinking were in a state of infancy. To be able to string well-educated, persuasive sentences together was an incredibly rare talent. Imagine someone launching a case against your neighbor for stealing something—that guy would have to go defend himself! There were no malpractice lawyers advertising to these people in between segments of Jerry Springer. So imagine the raw entertainment value of this as an Athenian citizen: when you’re done with the day’s work, instead of playing Angry Birds on your phone, you go down to the courthouse and hear some guy desperately babble and try to convince some judge who could ruin his life with the stroke of a pen that he’s innocent. It must have been some of the best entertainment around at the time.

Needless to say, this made the average Athenian horrified at some level. It made them start to value being an articulate, logical person. It’s funny how motivated people get to start using their brains when not being able to string together a coherent sentence could ruin their entire life! Couple this with the fact that, for one of the first times in human history, it was actually possible for an ambitious citizen to run for public office and work their way up to higher levels of government. Sure, it was an incredible opportunity in theory, but no one was ever going to vote for you if you weren’t a proficient speaker who sounded intelligent.

The Athenian justice system and the possibility of holding political office were two factors that combined to create a massive demand in Athens for someone to teach the average citizen how to sound intelligent and win arguments. The opportunistic, smart people that stepped in to fill this demand became known as The Sophists.

**“The Athenians are right to accept advice from anyone, since it is incumbent on everyone to share in that sort of excellence, or else there can be no city at all.” - Protagoras**

The Sophists were seen by many during their time as a shady group of people. If the word “philosopher” means “lover of wisdom,” then The Sophists seemed to be focused on “sophia” (wisdom) but weren’t really concerned with the love part of it at all. The best way to describe The Sophists is that they were a combination of ITT Tech and a taco truck. They were mobile schools that would teach you anything you wanted to know for the right price. They were incredibly intelligent people who traveled around and stood in the public square screaming at people to try to attract business.



**Themis - Titaness representing law, order and balance. An Athenian paradigm during this time period; Judge Judy has nothing on this gal.**

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This was the extent of the interaction that most people had with The Sophists—getting yelled at! Eventually, people started getting annoyed by them. Stories about The Sophists began to circulate, and it wasn’t long before they started getting a bad reputation around town. Think about who their average customer was—not someone who was interested in becoming truly wise, but someone who was interested in winning arguments.

The Sophists, in effect, were being paid to create hundreds of individual masters of rhetoric. So now, when one of these newly created (and obviously guilty) masters of rhetoric was taken to court, they were able to use these fancy argument skills to get off scot-free—and this made the general public furious. The Sophists were now aiding and abetting criminals in a culture that held justice as perhaps the most important of all the virtues.

**“Rhetoric, it seems, is a producer of persuasion for belief, not for instruction in the matter of right and wrong ... And so the rhetorician's business is not to instruct a law court or a public meeting in matters of right and wrong, but only to make them believe.” - Plato**

If there is a positive to take from this, it’s that The Sophists ushered in a new age of critical thinking. They were the first in a long line of skeptic thinkers who understood that oftentimes when you’re having an argument, the person who wins that argument is not necessarily the person who is “right” or whose argument is closer to the “truth”; they’re just the person who’s a better arguer of the two.

Boys, I hate to tell you this, but when you lose an argument with your wife about leaving the toilet seat up, it’s not because leaving the toilet seat up is inherently wrong. There’s no cosmic law of the universe that states that toilet seats must be down at all times after use. She won that argument because she out-argued you. And quick aside, what are we trying to avoid by putting the toilet seat down? Are women around the world innocently plopping down on a toilet without checking if the seat is down and getting soaked by toilet water? I honestly don’t understand why I used this as an example in this book or what the eternal dispute between guys and girls is even trying to prevent! Shame on you ladies for not checking. I have never once hopelessly sat in a porcelain pool of cold water, but maybe I’m due for one.

HISTORY IS THE FICTION  
WE INVENT TO PERSUADE  
OURSELVES THAT EVENTS  
ARE KNOWABLE AND THAT  
LIFE HAS ORDER  
AND DIRECTION.



Culture and tradition are useful tools, but when we start pretending they are the infallible truth so that we can feel a little more secure about our existence, we tread on dangerous ground. Even a stuffed tiger knows more than me.

Toilets and gender warfare aside, let's talk about something more productive. Consider the fact that the lion's share of what we all consider to be right or wrong is ultimately based on conditioning that is relative to the time period and society we were born into. You may be like me and think we can transcend this conditioning, but at least be open-minded to the ideas of some philosophers who would argue that even when you religiously scrutinize your own beliefs in an attempt to not conform to the cultural cues of your time period, things like your ability to reason, your conception of what questions are worth asking, and the very processes of your brain itself, are ultimately and hopelessly molded by whatever circumstances you were born into.

The Sophists would say that regardless of what argument you are having, the person who wins the argument is not necessarily the person whose opinion is closest to the truth, but the person who was able to shut down the arguments of the other person more effectively. I think they are right.

Let's look at an example of an argument The Sophists would be talking about:

Imagine a woman was just promoted to manager at a Jiffy Lube and two co-workers are arguing about whether it was a good decision or not to choose her for the job. One side of the argument is a male chauvinist who is arguing that it wasn't a good move for the business, and the other side is a radical feminist who is making a case that women are, by nature, better leaders than men.

*Male Chauvinist: I don't know why those morons did this. I can't imagine being confident that we're doing the right thing here with a woman as the manager. I used to work at the movie theater, and we had a woman manager who was absolutely clueless.*

*Feminist: Is your wife absolutely clueless at everything she does?*

*Chauvinist: Well, no.*

*Feminist: So you concede that there is a difference between certain women and their ability to complete certain tasks?*

*Chauvinist: I guess, yeah.*

*Feminist: Well then, I would argue that what makes someone clueless or not at a certain task has nothing to do with her being a woman.*

*Chauvinist: Sure, but all things being equal I would put a man in the position. They're better at getting stuff done, they aren't as emotional...*

*Feminist: Hold on, you said all things being equal, and then proceeded to point out differences! So, you're arguing that things aren't equal between men and women. It's okay that you're contradicting yourself though because I actually agree! I would say that we are not equal. I would say that women are far better leaders than men. First of all, they aren't all amped up on testosterone constantly trying to be the alpha male—what a distraction! Also, men are always aggressive and competitive, which can cause them to foolishly rush into unfavorable situations. A woman has the composure to put her place in the hierarchy on the back burner and make a decision not centered around her ego. Also, women are just plain smarter than those dumb apes.*

*Chauvinist: No! Albert Einstein was a man and he was the smartest person ever!*

*Feminist: That glorified patent-office clerk? His IQ was only around 160. Marilyn Vos Savant had an IQ of 190! Some of the world's most capable and brilliant leaders are women! Look at Condoleezza Rice!*

*Chauvinist: Are you kidding me? Condoleezza Rice has a way lower IQ than Albert Einstein!*

*Feminist: Firstly, you aren't addressing any of the points I made before. Secondly, you're nitpicking insignificant points because your primary argument has no merit. The fact that one man has a higher IQ than one woman doesn't prove that men are smarter than women, and it doesn't even come close to proving that a woman is too stupid to manage a Jiffy Lube!*

*Chauvinist: Yeah, well you are only defending her so much because you are a woman yourself!*

*Feminist: Now look at you. Discrediting the source of the information*

*because you don't want to address the point I made. If you can make me a poor source of information, then you don't have to take an honest look at everything that comes out of my mouth. This is just a side-stepping tactic you're using in this argument. Well, use your imagination then. Pretend what I said came out of the mouth of someone you respect. How would you refute it?*

*Chauvinist: I don't know. Maybe you're right.*

*Feminist: Yeah, now pass me that oil filter and make sure you steal the change out of this guy's cup-holders!*

This argument is a great example of what The Sophists are talking about. Both sides are wrong. Both sides have oversimplified ways of looking at the situation, but the feminist is much better at spotting fallacies in the other person's argument and using them to her advantage. The feminist obviously came out on top here, but it is not because her opinion was closer to the truth. They're both wrong to the point of comedy. They're both touting opinions that are actually very similar to each other, just on opposite ends of a spectrum.

But this is deeper than it might initially seem. The reality is: these sorts of conversations don't only happen in ancient Athens and 21st century Jiffy Lubes; they happen all the time. These processes of thought make up many of the conversations we have with each other, and in most cases have a direct and profound effect on how happy we are.

Have you ever known someone who was really smart most of the time, but there was always that one issue that would make you cringe over how wrong they were every time it came up? It could be anything—religious views, political views, or maybe they believed in some elaborate, preposterous conspiracy theory. The specifics of what it is don't matter; what matters is that if you aren't careful, you could be falling into the same horrible intellectual trap that may be making you completely miserable at this very moment! Let me explain what I mean.

If you are reading this book, I have both good news and bad news for you. The good news is: you are smart. Congratulations! The bad news is: that intelligence you possess is both a blessing and a curse. I'm guessing most of you already know at some level what I'm talking about. If you're a smart

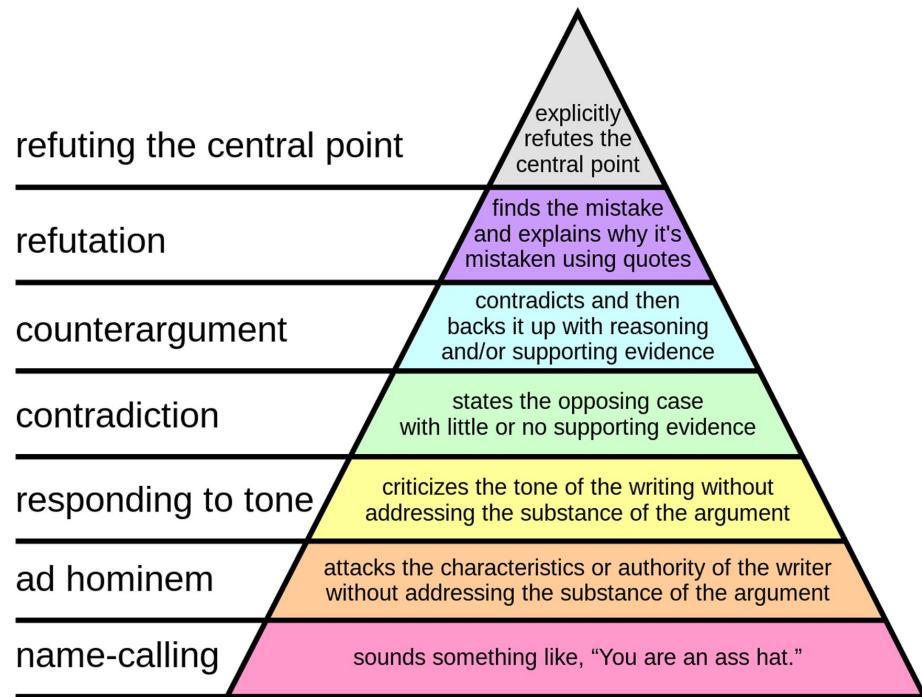
person, there is a crucial lesson that you need to learn about that intelligence at some point in your life, and there may not be a better group of morally loose soothsayers to teach you that lesson than The Sophists of ancient Athens. To put it briefly: be truly mindful of your deepest convictions, because in the meantime, your life is passing you by.

**“You are young, my son, and, as the years go by, time will change and even reverse many of your present opinions. Refrain therefore awhile from setting yourself up as a judge of the highest matters.” - Plato**

Being a smart person, you are going to be capable of things that other people just can't do. In the way a naturally gifted athlete is able to dunk a basketball while you can't even touch the net, the same thing holds true with your brain and its ability to do things. You're going to be able to hold positions that would be otherwise ridiculous and win an argument against someone purely on the basis of your intellect. I'm confident every single person reading this has done so before. I know I have. Here is the process:

1. You were young.
2. You thought you knew everything about some topic.
3. You have an argument with someone and defend your position.
4. You destroy that person in the argument.
5. You feel validated.
6. Fast forward six months and you realize they were right.

As a smart person, you need to be extremely careful you don't spend your life defending stupid ideas. Sometimes the stupid ideas aren't that bad at all. Sometimes the stupid ideas just cause you to get a little frustrated. Sometimes the stupid ideas cause you to lose your temper or go into a rage blackout. Sometimes the stupid ideas can even make you feel downright miserable about your entire existence. The common thread among all these examples is that you owe it to yourself to not lazily assent to beliefs and see winning arguments with other people as reinforcement that what you believe is true.



**Basic but hierarchical breakdown of the common fallacies in argument. How far down the pyramid does your family go?**

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Just as an example, how many people listen to hostile talk radio shows on a daily basis and think that there is a single group of people that is causing not only all of society's problems, but most of their personal problems as well? I can imagine someone with an IQ of 150 listening to these programs and spending their entire life winning arguments with their spouse, their family, their coworkers, and anyone else willing to listen about how horrible this group of people is. I can see them being angry, with each successive argument won serving as increasing reinforcement of how right they are. I can see each successive argument won serving as justification for being even more angry than they were the day before.

This is just a single example, but it doesn't take much imagination to come up with any number of beliefs we might be holding right now that we are fighting tooth and nail to defend and that ultimately don't serve us at all. The problem lies in our motivations for having the argument to begin with. When a sophist teaches someone to use fallacies and tricks to win an argument they really should lose, the person having that argument isn't concerned with knowing the truth; they're concerned with winning the argument. If The Sophists have taught me anything, it's to remove this ego-driven desire I have to win an argument versus potentially losing an argument.

When you lose an argument, you learn something new. When you win an argument, you get an apology. I'll let you decide which one is better.

Truth is a slippery thing. It's a ghost you can chase your entire life and never catch a glimpse of. The sickest part of all is that if you ever actually caught a glimpse of this ghost you'd been chasing, would you even know that you'd seen it?

**"Then the case is the same in all the other arts for the orator and his rhetoric; there is no need to know the truth of the actual matters, but one merely needs to have discovered some device of persuasion which will make one appear to those who do not know to know better than those who know." - Plato**

No story serves as a better word of caution to argument-prone smart people everywhere than the story of Carneades and his trip to Rome. Carneades was born around 214 BC and was named the head of the skeptical academy long

after Plato had died. Rome, during this particular point in history, was a major power in the Mediterranean region. So much so that they fined the city of Athens a considerable sum for going against certain territorial rules Rome had imposed upon them.

Anyway, the important part is: Athens didn't want to pay this hefty fine to the Romans, so they sent the heads of each of the different philosophical schools of thought at the time as a token of submission/olive branch/last ditch attempt at trying to get someone to reason the fine down a few notches. Carneades went to Rome representing the skeptics.

The story goes that the first day Carneades arrived in Rome he stood up in front of the Roman people and captivated them with a speech unlike they had ever heard before. The subject of the speech was justice. Justice, Carneades argued, was the most important of all the virtues. Without justice, none of the other virtues could even have the chance to exist! If it weren't for the incredible justice system of the Roman people and their just government, they could never have ascended to power in the Mediterranean as quickly as they did after the tragic death of Alexander the Great.

Carneades made it seem impossible to disagree with the fact that justice is something that any right thinking, virtuous person should strive for. He concludes his speech and people erupted in applause. It was pandemonium in the public square. The Romans loved this guy. Of all the speeches given by any of the other heads of the philosophical schools, no one got the response that Carneades got.

Carneades and the heads of the other schools spoke to the Roman government, managed to get the fine reduced, and were getting ready to leave on their final day in Rome, when Carneades decides to give another speech to the Roman people.



You can see the absolute stranglehold of power Rome had over the entire region after the death of Alexander the Great. Little did they know they would fortunate enough to have someone as important as me foreshadowing about writing a book about their philosophical schools one day.

This time, he stands up in front of the crowd filled with many of the same people from the first day, and he argues about the merits and necessity of injustice. Just as articulate and captivating as the first time around, Carneades argues that injustice is a necessary means of insuring that the other virtues are followed by the population. He argues that it was only by unjust wars and unjust successions of power that Rome was ever able to achieve the level of prominence and power that they had in the Mediterranean in such a short period of time. Carneades finishes his speech to the same thunderous applause he received the first day while arguing the exact opposite position.

In this story, Carneades seamlessly embodies what The Sophists taught the Athenians. Winning an argument, or even winning public opinion if you're running for office, is less about your argument being closer to the truth, and more about your argument being more persuasive than the other guy's argument.

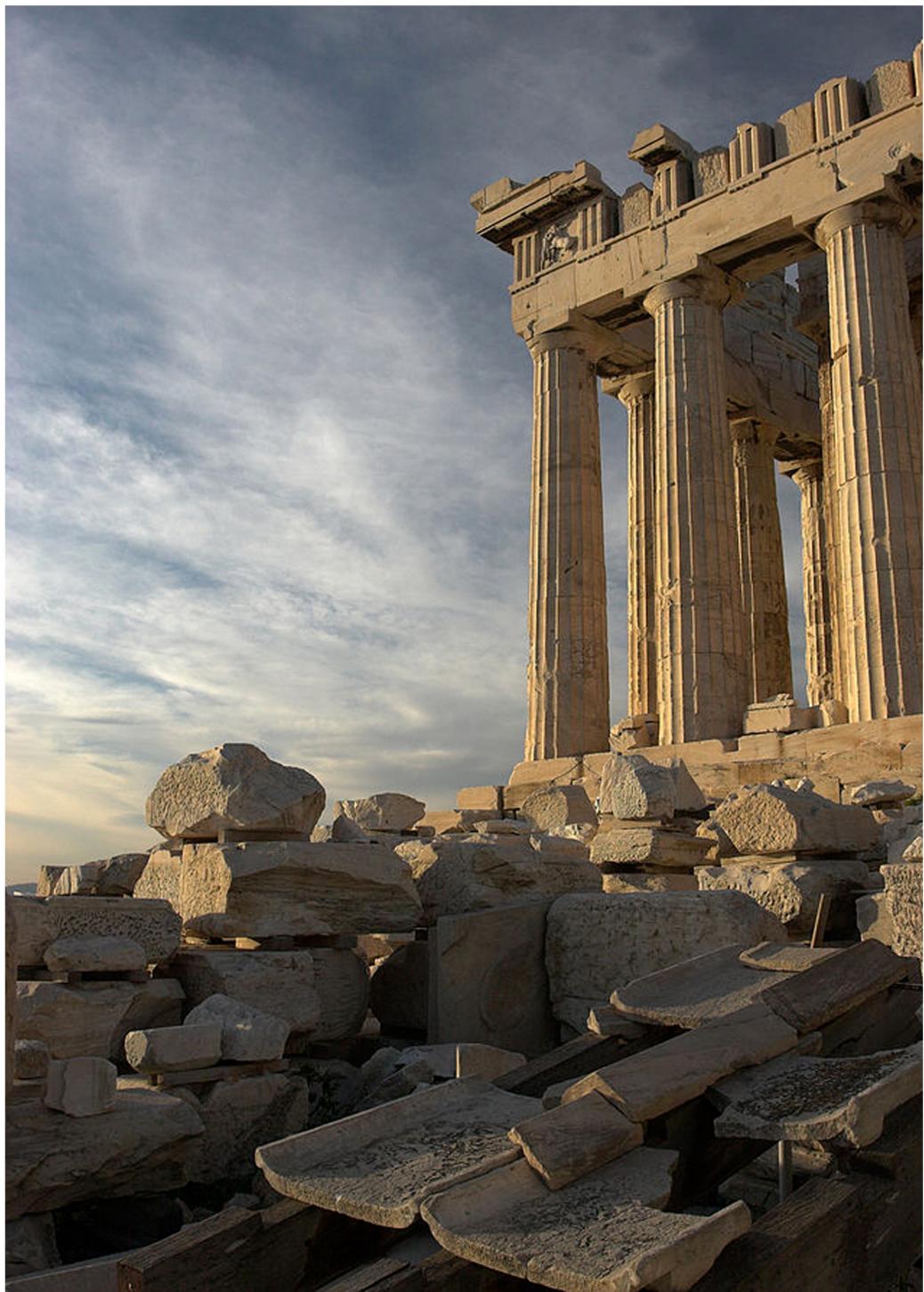
Whenever I find myself getting a little too emotionally invested in being "right" or "wrong" in a conversation I'm having, whenever I find myself trying to persuade instead of learn, I always bring myself back to center by thinking of Carneades, the crowds of people in the Roman square, and the day he proved to them all that this elusive thing we call truth has very little connection to who ends up seeming "right" or "wrong" in a fleeting moment.

The Sophists even took this thinking one step further. They asked, "If we can't tell who is "right" by seeing the outcome of an argument, then how do we tell who is "good" or "bad" at all? What is "good"? Are these questions worth asking at all?"

One of the most famous and renowned of all The Sophists was a guy named Protagoras. Protagoras realized that everyone walks around with this preconceived idea of whether what they're doing is good or bad, but what are "good" and "bad"?

Protagoras points out that what most people deem to be "right" or "good" is really just an arbitrary byproduct of the social conventions programmed into them since birth—something they had no control over at all. Yet they take such pride in these conceptions!

He asks us to marvel at this pride that people have. Think about the endless succession of people walking around, surveying Athens, poised and waiting for an opportunity to criticize someone for doing something differently than they would. Maybe it was the way they dressed, maybe it was the way they spoke; like hungry wolves, these surveyors would walk around searching for something, anything wrong with someone else, so that they could assert themselves as superior with their more “refined” sense of right and wrong.



**Some of the most majestic structures in all of Greece stem from this golden age ushered in by the rule of Pericles. What could our modern day Parthenon be if we had a modern day Pericles?**

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But is one person's culture inherently any more "right" than another person's culture? Can we ever honestly answer "yes" to that question? If so, what is it based on? Is a culture built around loving other people and egalitarianism any more or less "good" on a cosmic level than a culture built around child molestation?

If you are tempted to say yes here, Protagoras would want you to at least notice that if you look at the criteria that you're using for making that judgment closely enough, you'll eventually be led directly back to where you started: the time and cultural conditions you were born into.

Protagoras thought that both the wolf who was on the prowl in the public square and the person being criticized both had a conception of "good" that was equally baseless. This isn't a mystery to us. We encounter these sorts of subjective judgments all the time! What is hot for one person is cold for another. What is dark for one person is light for another. Protagoras opens his most famous work proclaiming that,

**"Man is the measure of all things: of things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not."**

Just as there is no right or wrong in an argument, just a better arguer, there is no good or bad inherent in things, just a person or society's judgment of them. This idea was the focal point of an entire early strand of philosophy known as relativism.

This whole line of thinking has to be really annoying for some of you. Really? Everyone is right? No idea is better or worse than any other idea—just different? What a cop out. What a philosophical crutch. If Protagoras just reminds you of the super compassionate, open-minded, fanny pack wearing soccer mom that hands out Capri Suns at the end of the philosophical debate—let's talk about how his argument is far from flawless.

Firstly, if everything is good and nothing is bad, then nothing is good. Good only exists when it can be contrasted with something bad.

Secondly, if everyone is right regardless of what they think, then how about the guy who thinks he is right and everyone else is wrong? That guy has to

be wrong in at least some small sense, right?

Nonetheless, for all the bad stuff associated with them, the history of philosophy would be far worse off without The Sophists. We needed the Sophists to counterbalance the dogma that came before them.

And personally, I can't think of many things more influential to me than when they made it clear just how easy it was to be won over by complete garbage said in a beautiful and compelling way. How many charismatic, well-spoken cult leaders have literally convinced people to kill themselves in the name of a cause that didn't exist? How many articulate, powerfully verbose dictators have convinced entire nations to go to war and sacrifice millions of lives for the sake of their own personal glory? This doesn't need to be dramatic: how many late night infomercial salesmen have charmed people into buying a blender that they didn't need? (Let's not forget about the free spatula they got for calling within the next five minutes).

There's something about human psychology that is vulnerable to these rhetorical attacks. Consider the possibility of how much time someone could waste over the course of their life listening to complete garbage said in a beautiful and compelling way? How much time could someone waste over the course of their life being a smart person defending stupid positions? How much time have you already spent? I believe none of us are impervious to this pitfall, and what an incredible lesson about life to learn from a group of hated philosophers who lived thousands of years ago.

**“As touching the gods, I do not know whether they exist or not, nor how they are featured; for there is much to prevent our knowing: the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life.” - Protagoras**

Real quickly, if you're looking for a solid way of differentiating between ideas that are truly good and ideas that just sound good, take my advice: invest the time to learn the common fallacies people use in arguments. You can search for them on Google. Entire books have been written about them. Even children's books have been written about them. But one thing's for sure: memorizing and being able to identify all the fallacies of argument is one of the most useful skills you could ever have. It's like putting a military grade security system on your brain that's rigged to spot terrible arguments. When some detestable person comes along trying to convince you of their brand of BS—cult leaders, dictators, cable news commentators—the alarm

bells start ringing and you know exactly why. It is wonderful skill to have.



**Democritus and Protagoras talking in a 17th century painting by Salvator Rosa.  
I think Protagoras owes him money or something.**

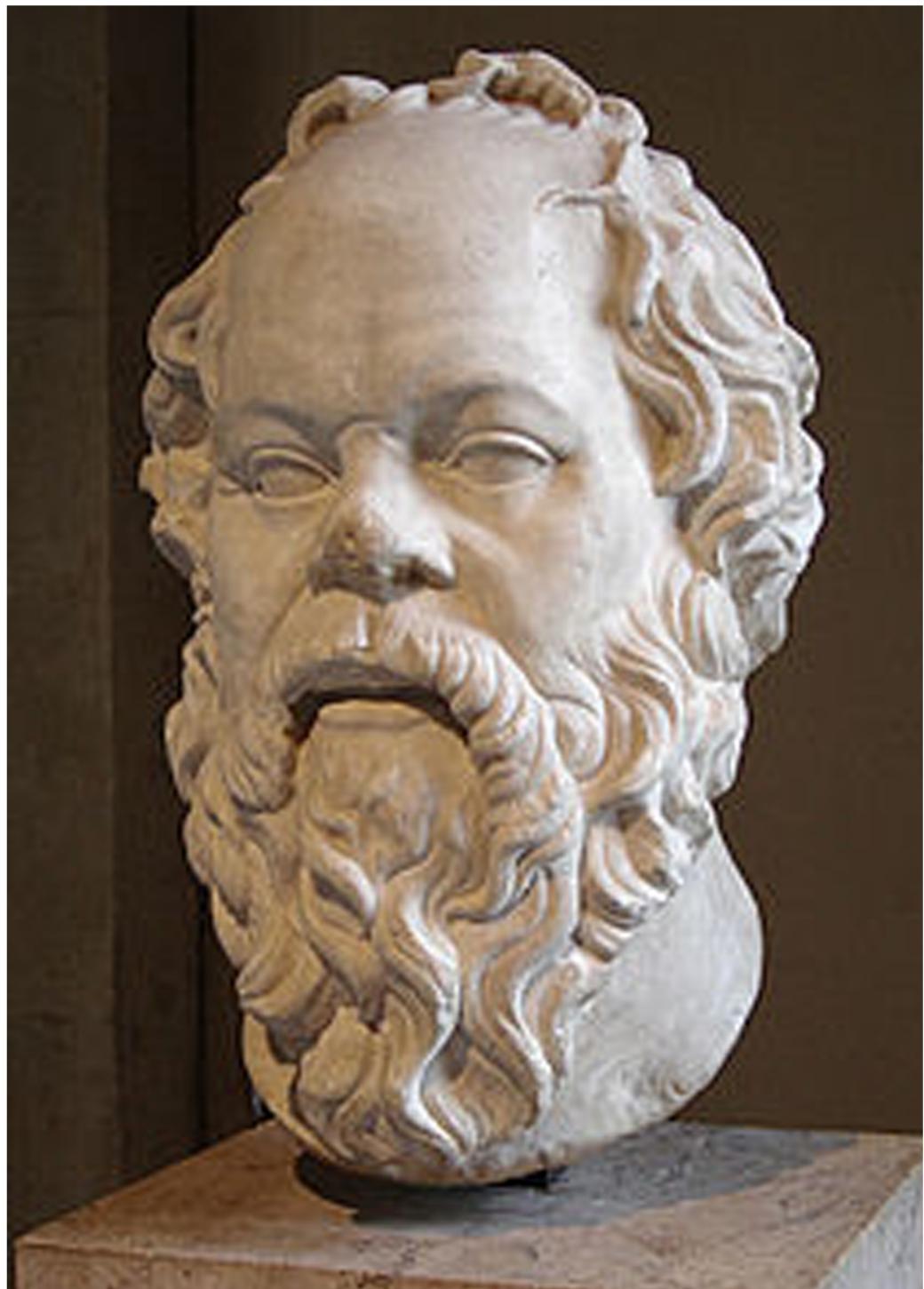
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CHAPTER

# 8

S O C R A T E S

...  
*"The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being."*  
- Socrates



**Socrates (470 BC - 399 BC)**

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**Meno: I feel, somehow, that I like what you are saying.**

**Socrates: And I, Meno, like what I am saying. Some things I have said of which I am not altogether confident. But that we shall be better and braver and less helpless if we think that we ought to enquire, than we should have been if we indulged in the idle fancy that there was no knowing and no use in seeking to know what we do not know; — that is a theme upon which I am ready to fight, in word and deed, to the utmost of my power.**

As you're well aware of by now, one of the downsides to living in the fourth century BC is that outside of court cases, shadow puppetry, and beating your head against the wall, there was very little for you to entertain yourself with. I'm convinced this is why they went to war so often back then; there was nothing else to do! If Alexander the Great had access to the Call of Duty franchise, I would be writing this book in Persian. There's a famous story that illustrates exactly how bored these people must have gotten.

Apparently, one day when nothing particularly noteworthy was going on, Socrates and his friends decided to hold a beauty contest between Socrates and his lifelong, loyal companion Critobulus.

The whole thing was a joke. Socrates was a lot of things, but reasonably good looking was not one of them. Critobulus was a wealthy business man who made the vast majority of his money in the field of agriculture. Let's not go too far—Critobulus was no Brad Pitt. He by no means resembled the statues of Greek gods that were all around them, but putting him up against Socrates in a beauty contest was laughable.

Socrates was hideous. He knew it, everyone else knew it, and they all embraced it. But this is why it was entertaining to them! There's more to a beauty contest than just beauty. After all, in having a beauty contest, you're weighing what you see up against your preconceived assumption about beauty, and Socrates wasn't going to go down without a fight!

Socrates gets right down to business. He questions his friend Critobulus in front of the group of judges and tries to define what exactly we mean when we say “beauty.” The reason I love this story and always remember it is because it is one of the purest and most awesome examples of who Socrates was.

*Socrates: “Do you hold, then, that beauty is to be found only in man, or is it also in other objects?”*

*Critobulus: “In faith, my opinion is that beauty is to be found quite as well in a horse or an ox or in any number of inanimate things. I know, at any rate, that a shield may be beautiful, or a sword, or a spear.”*

*Soc. “How can it be that all these things are beautiful when they are entirely dissimilar?”*

*“Why, they are beautiful and fine,” answered Critobulus, “if they are well made for the respective functions for which we obtain them, or if they are naturally well constituted to serve our needs.”*

*Soc. “Do you know the reason why we need eyes?”*

*Crit. “Obviously to see with.”*

*“In that case, it would appear without further ado that my eyes are finer ones than yours.”*

*“How so?”*

*“Because, while yours see only straight ahead, mine, by bulging out as they do, see also to the sides.”*

*Crit. “Do you mean to say that a crab is better equipped visually than any other creature?”*

*Soc. “Absolutely; for its eyes are also better set to insure strength.”*

This story encapsulates Socrates. Notoriously ugly, unkempt, clever, funny, abrasive, and dedicated to finding the truth. Socrates may have not won the beauty contest, but he did exactly what he set out to do. Critobulus claims at

the beginning of the contest to know what beauty is. He says that beauty is when things are well made for the respective functions for which we obtain them. But Socrates, simply by asking a few questions, showed Critobulus that the answer may not be as simple as he initially thought.

This powerful example is what Socrates is known for. He didn't live in a castle, he didn't walk on water or appear in two places at once or deliver anyone from evil; he delivered them from ignorance. He didn't have some magic book associated with him, in fact he never wrote any of his thoughts down at all. To Socrates, philosophy wasn't about writing stuff down; it was about engaging people—prompting a discussion and then putting people through an intense minefield of questioning.

Most of the time, he would approach someone and feign complete ignorance about a particular subject, telling them he was tortured with confusion and begging them to help pull him out of his confusion. Most people would try to help him. Wouldn't you? If you saw someone hanging from a ledge, begging for you to help them back to solid ground, would you help them up if you could? I hope the answer is yes! Socrates put people in this place deliberately, and after the discussion they had was over, his hope was that both of the parties involved would be wiser for the experience.

No one had ever done philosophy this way. Before Socrates, philosophy was something reserved for a few privileged elite. On the off chance you were born rich enough to travel the world and be educated, you then earned the luxury of being able to sit by yourself for the rest of your life and use your brain to conjure up some new philosophical insight. If you felt really confident about it, you could carve it into stone and then share it with all your friends. Socrates no doubt realized this and thought that your level of income shouldn't be a prerequisite for thinking properly. The great philosopher and historian Cicero summed it up best when he wrote:

**"Socrates however (was the) first (who) called philosophy down from heaven, and placed it in cities, and introduced it even in homes, and drove (it) to inquire about life and customs and things good and evil."**

This doesn't seem that revolutionary to us. Congratulations, Socrates. You realized that you can think philosophically about how to live your life! This is where you are wrong, hypothetical person, and one of the most interesting elements of Socrates is how he arrived at this conclusion.

The story goes that a friend of Socrates went to see the Oracle at Delphi. Delphi was a city and the Oracle was a local peasant woman tripping on drugs who the people of the time believed was channeling the Greek god named Apollo. Lindsay Lohan must wake up every morning ruing the fact she was born just out of reach of her dream career.

Now, I can't say for certain that these peasant women weren't actually channeling a God, just like I can't say for certain that Santa didn't actually deliver presents to all the other kids in my neighborhood growing up. At the risk of repeating myself to the point of redundancy, I would guess these peasant women were not actually in direct correspondence with the creator of the universe. After all, if there is one thing humans have proven to be incredible at, it's taking some ostensibly meaningless event and making it into the handiwork of God. Regardless, Socrates' friend consulted the Oracle and he asked her the question, "Who is the wisest person in the world?"

The Oracle said,

"Socrates."



**The temple of Apollo at Delphi. People would come from distant lands to consult the oracle who supposedly channeled the Greek God Apollo. I remember my first beer.**

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The guy had to be disappointed. Really, who asks that question without hoping just a little bit deep inside that the Oracle is going to say, “You!” Socrates’ friend let out a sigh, thanked the Oracle for her wisdom, and returned to tell Socrates the good news. But when Socrates heard this, he didn’t start dancing around screaming like he’d just won the Mega Millions; he was confused. Socrates went for a walk. He stared longingly into his reflection in a puddle of water and asked himself how it could be possible. How could he be the wisest man on earth when he felt like he knew absolutely nothing for certain.

Sparked by this confusion, the story goes that he set out to prove the Oracle wrong. He took to the streets. He went straight to the wisest people he knew—government officials, local dignitaries—and he asked them basic questions. Questions he still hadn’t found an answer to, like:

**What is justice?**  
**What is virtue?**  
**What is courage?**

Without exception, they all had tons to say about these topics. They all claimed to know the answers, but after Socrates asked a few follow-up questions, he soon realized that they didn’t know what these things were either. They just believed they knew the answers.

And then it hit him: the Oracle said he was the wisest person in the world because while everyone else knew nothing and masqueraded around believing they knew things, Socrates was at least aware of his ignorance. This small advantage was what made him the smartest person in the world. He famously said:

**“I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.”**

This is how Socrates developed his conversational, confrontational style of questioning. Just because he knew that he knew nothing, he certainly wasn’t done thinking about stuff. After he realized that it was only his knowledge of

his ignorance that made him wiser than the others around him, he hung around in the public square trying to pass this wisdom along and perhaps get to the bottom of one of these questions.

It's fascinating how uniquely Socrates looked at knowledge. Knowledge wasn't this thing that we gathered through reading books or watching documentaries. Socrates compared himself to a midwife. Instead of teaching people things or throwing out facts like a walking Snapple cap, he thought he was asking questions and delivering new ideas into the world, much like a midwife would direct and guide a newborn baby into the world.

I think the only way to truly understand Socrates and his public image is to put yourself in the shoes of the average Athenian who would've been approached by him.

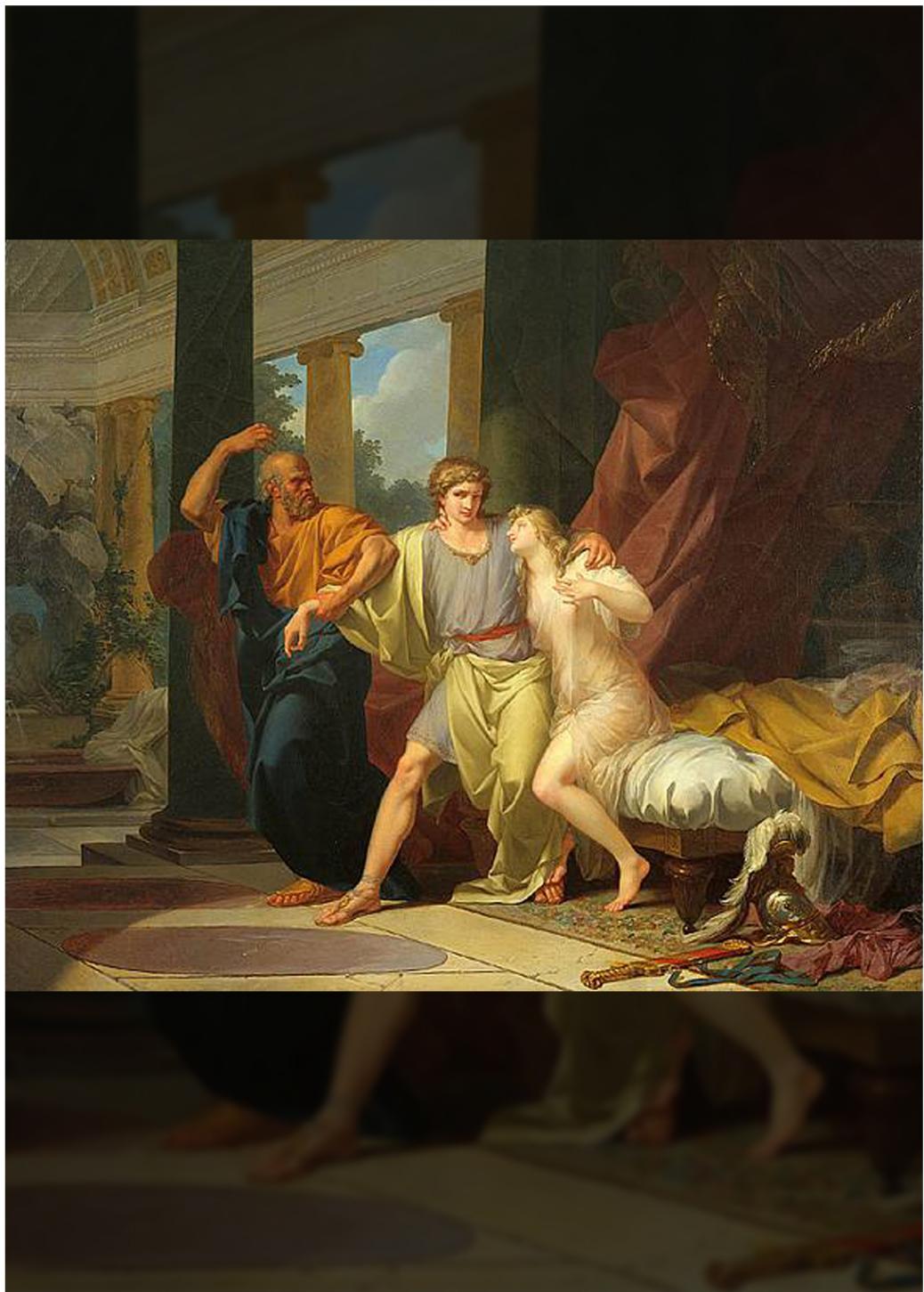
Imagine how it would feel to be doing your shopping in the public square, minding your own business, and have some ugly, smelly guy in a dirty robe come up to you and start acting distressed. He starts being self-effacing, claiming that he is lost and looking for someone to rescue him from his ignorance, that he just wants to ask you a couple questions. Then he asks you one that seems easy like, "What is justice?" You answer him and, like the most annoying inquisitive child in the history of the world, he continues to question you until he makes you realize you have no idea what you're talking about. Personally, I would love it. I could spend years of my life talking to this guy, but it's not hard to understand why this would be annoying to someone who didn't volunteer for the job.

### **"The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being."**

It didn't earn him many fans, that's for certain. Eventually, he had a bad reputation. If you're Socrates, there aren't many potentially good outcomes for you if this is your strategy to enlighten yourself. People would either be mad at him for making them look stupid or for not leaving them alone. Apparently, people eventually got tired of being humiliated in public and decided to band together and find a way to bring Socrates to trial on some trumped up charges at the ripe age of 70.

But even this isn't the full story. To totally understand why Socrates was put on trial in the first place and the kind of horrendously biased jury he was inevitably going to face no matter what he said, it's important we look at the

political climate that existed in Greece at the time.



**Socrates dragging Alcibiades from the arms of sensual and voluptuous pleasure by Jean-Baptiste Regnault. A great personification of his life's work of getting people to focus on what he called the improvement of the soul.**

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Five years before the trial of Socrates, Athens and Sparta ended the Peloponnesian war. Sparta won, by the way, and Athens was turned into an oligarchy. In 404 BC, a fine group of well-meaning gents known as "the thirty tyrants" took power and, to make a short story shorter, committed such gruesome acts of genocide that they managed to get overthrown only a year after taking power.

It took a couple years to sort things out. There was betrayal, conspiracy, evil intentions afoot—but there was a happy ending for the people of Athens: democracy was finally restored. Here's the unfortunate part: Socrates was put on trial only two years after all this drama took place, and people were in no mood to entertain anyone questioning the government or trying to make major changes. It was a long time coming, but at the age of 70, during this unfortunate planetary alignment of political conditions, Socrates was brought up on charges of corrupting the young and denying the gods of the state.

Coming into the trial, Socrates had all the chips stacked against him. Not only did Socrates have all the personality traits that we've discussed so far, but to top it off, he was the victim of a very effective smear campaign. Another figure living in Athens at the time was the famous playwright Aristophanes, and he released a play titled "Clouds" with Socrates as a central character.

To be fair, Aristophanes never intended for Socrates to get a bad rap from the play; it was a comedy. The point was to make people laugh. To do this, Aristophanes made Socrates a cartoonish moron who could barely string a sentence together. One of the moments in the play that got the biggest roar of laughter from the audience at the time, certainly a moment everyone went home remembering, was when the character of Socrates holds his arms out in the air and spins around in a circle screaming, "I'm walking on air! I'm walking on air!" My, how culture has evolved since then.

What's interesting to consider is the fact that although what passes for comedy has changed, the way people respond to media is very similar. The majority of the people who saw the play assumed that the silly depiction of Socrates was an accurate representation of the man himself. It's easy for us to throw stones two and a half thousand years later, but you can't be too mad at the people of Athens when you consider how many people in today's

world derive almost their entire lifestyle, feelings, expectations, social responses, passions, convictions—they outsource their entire life to cues fed to them through various forms of media. The lazy thinking that condemned one of the greatest philosophers to death still remains as a mainstay in the thinking of the average person.

The entire story of his trial, his defense, his conviction, and his reactions are cataloged by Plato in one of his most famous works, *The Apology*. But even though it's called *The Apology*, Socrates didn't apologize for anything. It was incredibly common at the time when you were convicted of a serious crime to bring your friends and family up in front of the court and to have them beg and grovel for your life to be spared. Socrates was having none of that.

Sure, he didn't want to be put to death, but he was committed to doing the right thing, not whatever he needed to do to get acquitted. Even being 70 years old, think of the courage this must have taken. Most people when faced with the penalty of death would do whatever they could to get the charges reduced, but not Socrates.

In fact, in the Athenian judicial process of the time, the first part of the trial consisted of someone reading the offenses you were being charged with, and you were supposed to give a response. When Socrates stood before the court and they told him that one of the charges he faced was “corrupting the young,” they asked him what he had to say for himself, and he replied:

*“And is there any one who would rather be injured than benefited by those who live with him? Answer, my good friend, the law requires you to answer, does any one like to be injured?”*

*-Certainly not.*

*And when you accuse me of corrupting and deteriorating the youth, do you allege that I corrupt them intentionally or unintentionally?*

*-Intentionally, I say.*

*But you have just admitted that the good do their neighbors good, and the evil do them evil. Now, is that a truth which your superior wisdom has recognized thus early in life, and am I, at my age, in such darkness and*

*ignorance as not to know that if a man with whom I have to live is corrupted by me, I am very likely to be harmed by him; and yet I corrupt him, and intentionally, too, so you say, although neither I nor any other human being is ever likely to be convinced by you.” - Trial of Socrates*

If you were expecting Socrates to say something that blew your mind in this exchange here and didn't find it: don't worry, you didn't miss anything. What Socrates is saying here is not compelling at all, but that was his intention!

His argument is that he would never intentionally corrupt the young as they are accusing him of doing, because if he corrupts the young, then he as their neighbor, has to deal with the consequences of that. They might use these newly corrupted brains to commit violence or crime or any number of transgressions that would make corrupting them in the first place counter-intuitive.

This is far from a knock down argument, but it didn't matter to Socrates. Again, his goal wasn't to avoid being put to death. He says later in his speech that any man who is worth anything doesn't make moral decisions by considering things like the probability of their survival. No, they do the “right” thing, regardless of whether the odds are in their favor or not. The “right” thing here to Socrates was not begging for mercy for something that wasn't wrong in the first place.

To the surprise of no one, Socrates is found guilty. In keeping with Athenian jurisprudential practice, once found guilty, the person in question is given a second chance to make a speech to try to make a case for why they deserve a less severe punishment. If this seems confusing, keep in mind that people were sentenced to death all the time, and it was common for them to use this speech after they were found guilty of something terrible to beg the jury to spare their lives and allow them to leave Athens and never come back. The jury almost always accepted, and everyone ended up happy. Socrates had other plans.

Socrates begins by talking about legal systems in general, saying that it is only fitting that whatever punishment is laid out should be consistent with the amount of harm that was committed during the crime. Seems reasonable, but there is a problem. Socrates doesn't think that he hurt anyone.

In fact, he uses this second speech after being found guilty not to plead for his life, but to make a case that his daily ritual of relentlessly traveling around Athens putting people on blast in the public square and making them into happier, more virtuous people is actually doing a public service. He uses his speech to tell the courtroom that they shouldn't be punishing him at all; the people of Athens should be thanking him! If the punishment should fit the amount of harm done in the crime, he says that it would only be fitting if his punishment were free meals for life at the expense of the state! Normally, they would only do this sort of thing if some star athlete had just performed well at the Olympic games.

Not to mention other parts of his speeches in which he berates the citizenry like an abusive step father:

**"Are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honour and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul?"**

When they held the second vote, Socrates was sentenced to death by a larger margin than when he was voted guilty. Just think about that for a second. He actually got people so riled up that in a matter of minutes they went from claiming he was innocent, to calling for his execution.

In today's world, it is commonly said when someone gives their life for a cause that they are making "the ultimate sacrifice." I cannot put into words the level of reverence I have for Socrates for being so brave in the face of death. But on the other hand, if courage is bravery in the face of fear, Socrates may not have been very courageous at all. He wasn't afraid of death. The Athenians were shocked by this. When they looked on as he fearlessly rode his Trojan horse into certain death, they asked for an explanation. He responded here:

**"To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know."**

Socrates makes me feel like the biggest whining, sniveling baby who has ever learned to walk upright. When I'm on a plane and it hits a little turbulence, my stomach drops. I worry that my immensely important life of watching TV shows is going to end. When I stand on the edge of a cliff, my hands and feet start tingling and sweating, and I can't help but continuously repeat the vision of me tumbling down the rock face, slamming into the ground and making a Stephen West shaped hole in the ground. The fact is, millions of years of evolution has programmed us to have an aversion to death. The most basic software that operates in our heads, for whatever reason, wants us around and reproducing as long as possible.

Reflect on the fact that Socrates had the same biological makeup as you and me, but he apparently didn't feel the same paralyzing feeling of fear. His life of accosting people in the public square and examining his own life left him in such a state of wisdom that he completely transcended his biological makeup—a predisposition forged over the course of millions of years. I implore you to find a more powerful example to illustrate the practical power of philosophy in action.

There is a popular saying, “All fear is born of ignorance.”

In most cases, this is a useful insight. After all, when my plane hits turbulence, and I am paralyzed with fear, you don't have to look too deeply into the statistics to see how unfounded that fear is. Planes don't crash due to turbulence. When they do, it's an anomaly. Talk to any pilot having a cocktail before getting ready to fly to Maui, and they'll reinforce this. Come to think of it, why was that pilot drinking...

In the example of the turbulence, ignorance of the truth is what causes your fears initially, but is all fear this way? If you think the answer is no, then you think the statement, “All fear is born of ignorance,” is an overly extreme statement. And if you think that way, wait until you hear what Socrates had to say about the extent of damage ignorance causes to people.

Socrates famously said,

**“There is only one good: knowledge, and one evil: ignorance.”**

One of the things that is so noteworthy about Socrates, one of the reasons

why historians typically lump everyone that came before him into a single group referencing his name, is because he was the first one to heavily examine the concept of what it means to live a “good” life.

To put it kindly, Socrates didn’t agree with Protagoras. Man is not the measure of all things. When one person claims that suicide is “good” and another person claims that abstaining from suicide is “good,” that doesn’t make both of them good. The reason there’s confusion when we have arguments about these sorts of things, Socrates would say, is that neither of these people are in the position to be branding behaviors as “good” or “bad” in the first place. Neither of them have the faintest idea of what “good” is. If you think you do, just let Socrates ask you a couple questions, and he will be sure to let you know just how little you truly know about what is good.

Socrates thought that life was not just some elaborate preparation for what is waiting for you after you die. He was less interested in speculation and more focused on how we behave here and now, in the existence we’re currently in. He thought there was a whole set of tasks and challenges that faced us in this mortal coil, and the key to solving them lies in living virtuously.

But if we take what Socrates has told us so far at face value, we run into a huge problem here: even if we decide on a set of behaviors we think are virtuous, how can we be sure we fully understand what those virtues mean? After all, if I say that being courageous is a virtue, and Socrates waddles over to me and shows me that I don’t truly understand what courage is, can I really be said to be acting courageously? At most, my best attempt will only be a facsimile of a courageous person.

Socrates would probably answer you along these lines: your job on this planet is to extensively think about yourself, the world, and these virtues so that one day you can understand what they are and be truly wise. Nobody said it was going to be easy. Nobody even said it was going to be possible, especially not Socrates. In fact, even at 70 years old, Socrates still hadn’t arrived at a definition of anything he was satisfied with, but the pursuit alone led him closer to truth than anyone around him. He thought if everyone reached this position closer to the truth, it would not only make them happier people, but it would even make them incapable of committing an immoral act.

He thought that whenever someone committed an evil act, if you analyzed

their behavior closely enough, it was derived from some level of ignorance.

For example, let's say a band of Eco-marxists sets off a chemical explosive and burns down a lumber mill in protest of them cutting down trees. You have to admire their tenacity, but this is far from a wise act. This may stop the wanton cutting of trees in the short term, but this doesn't do much damage to the lumber mill. They have insurance that is going to cover the entire cost of the rebuild. The only people that incur a real cost are the millions of people who pay higher insurance premiums to make sure the insurance company stays in business. Ironically, all that insurance coverage is going to buy a brand new, state of the art lumber mill that will chop down and process trees at an unprecedented level of speed and efficiency. Was burning it down truly a wise act?

Socrates saw that human beings seem to by nature strive to be as comfortable as possible. He thought a wise person could never do something like burn down a lumber mill. It would be impossible; their wisdom would instantly make them realize the futility of it, and it would make them feel enormously uncomfortable. To Socrates, no person would ever purposely do something to make themselves uncomfortable, so no one would ever commit an evil act if only they knew enough.

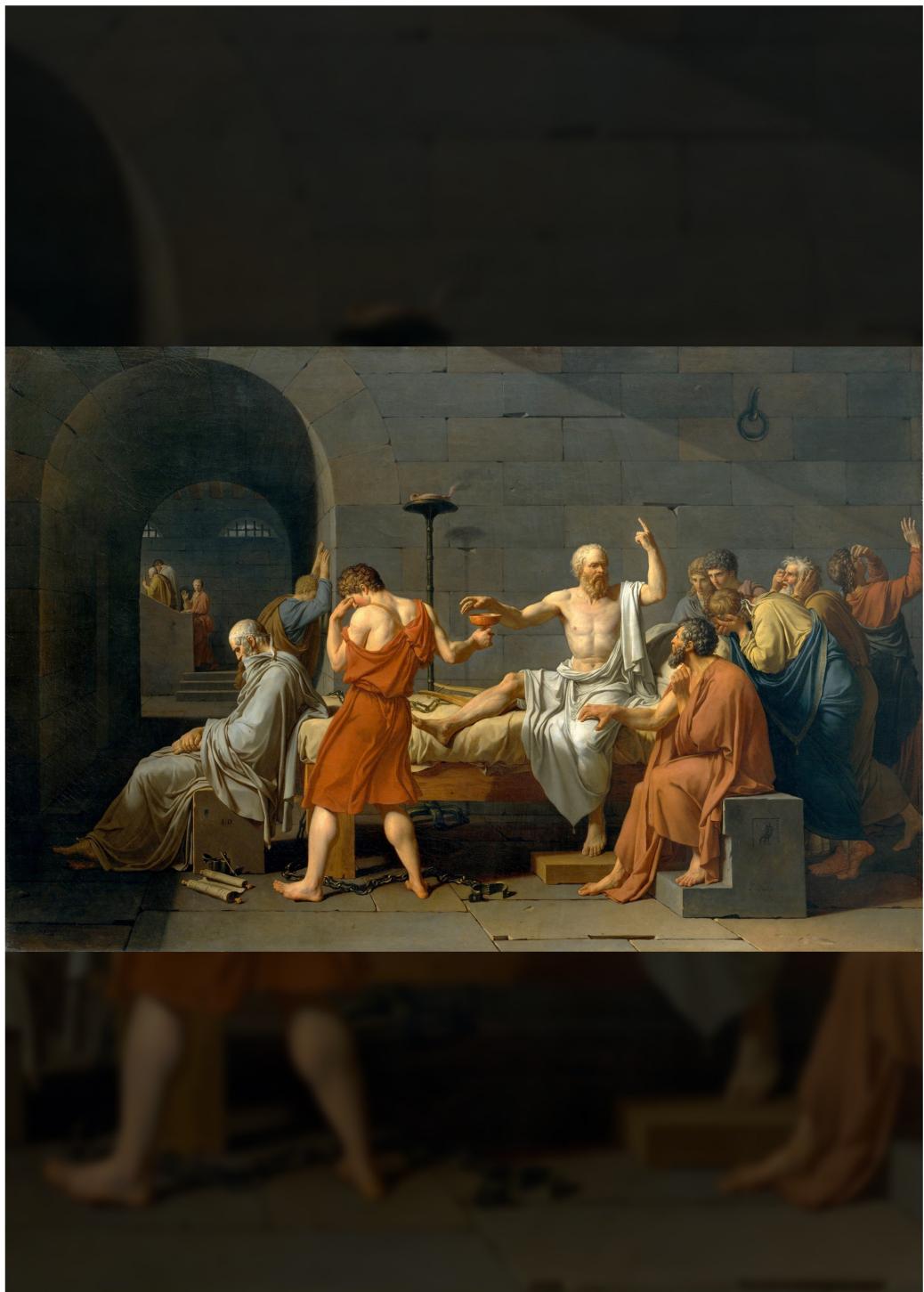
On the other hand, it's not hard to see the flaws in Socrates' thinking. Socrates lived a long time ago, so the idea that evil was directly connected to ignorance may have seemed plausible at the time. But head to any community college, and you'll find a plexiglass booth filled with people who, despite wanting to stop destroying their bodies with cigarettes, are helplessly addicted to smoking.

There are many more examples of exceptions to this rule that Socrates made, but it's interesting to think about how far this rule does apply. Is there some sort of connection between ignorance and crime?

Someone could make the argument: "Why is the majority of crime committed by younger people? Is it because they are younger and perhaps more ignorant of the consequences of immoral behavior?"

Someone could make the argument back: "Well, it could just be that all the people who would otherwise be older offenders have already been caught

and are incarcerated in a jail cell right now.”



The Death of Socrates is a 1787 painting by Jacques-Louis David. I can almost imagine being there watching as Socrates fearlessly drinks the poison.

It deeply pains me to read about what happened to Socrates. It is unnerving to consider that he garnered so many enemies who were willing to sentence him to death simply for asking questions. Especially toward the end of his life, Socrates had so many enemies that people loved to insult him, and a common insult they'd throw at him was calling him a sophist.

On one hand, you can see why they may have thought he was a sophist. People saw him publicly arguing, excited to teach others, and exchanging conversations for meals—he kind of looked like a sophist. But as philosophy has taught me, popular opinion is almost always wrong. Socrates is the opposite of a sophist. A sophist is someone who was paid to teach people the art of rhetoric so they could win an argument they should've lost. Socrates was someone who purposefully lost an argument he should've won because just living wasn't good enough; he had to live virtuously. His famous (almost) final words have resonated with me since the moment I read them:

**“The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways — I to die and you to live. Which is the better, only God knows”**



**Fun fact:** The man that would eventually walk the marketplace preaching virtue was at one point a warrior, and a great one at that. Plato writes in *The Apology* about him heroically saving the lives of his fellow soldiers in several battles.

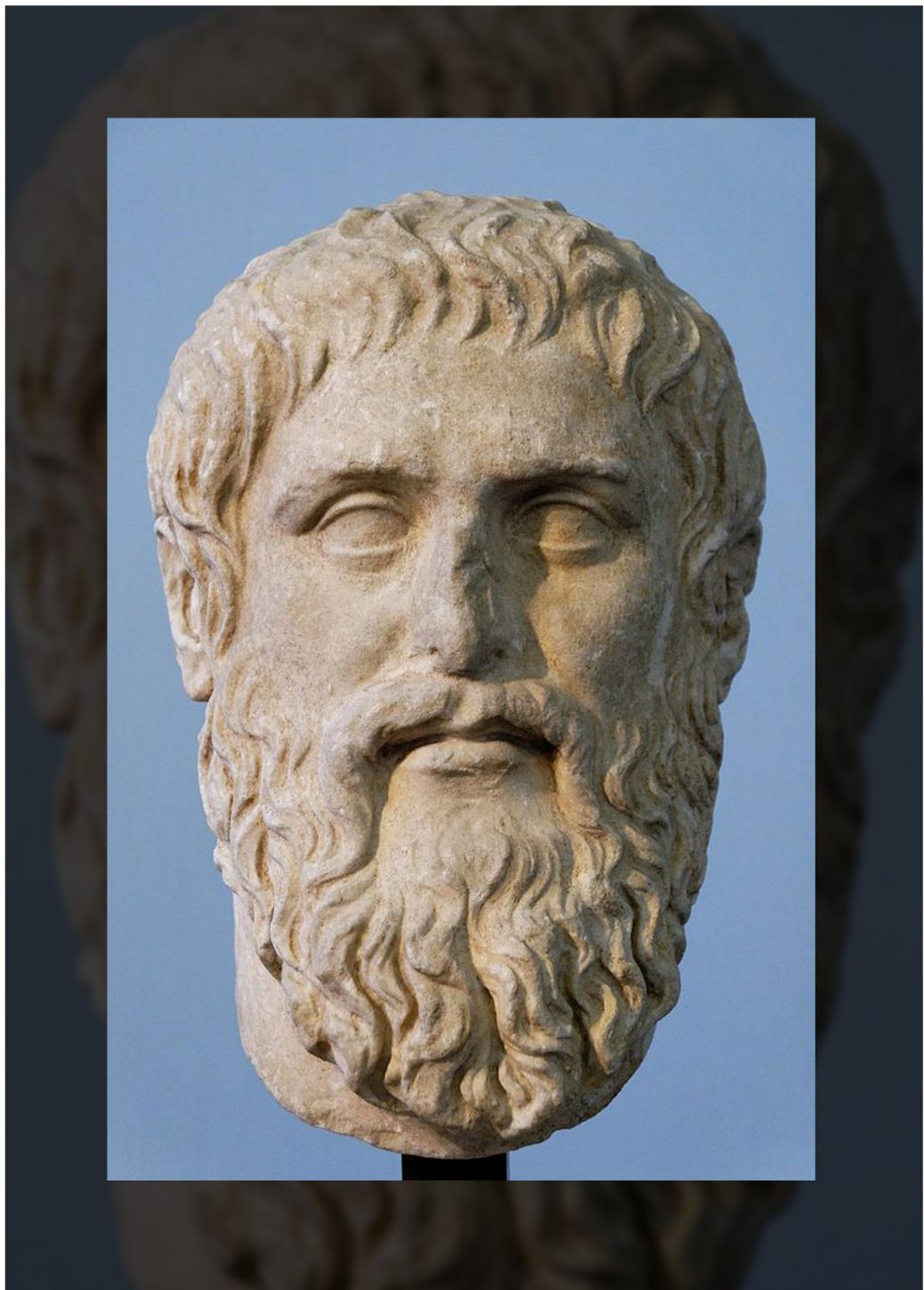
CHAPTER



PLATO

“It would be better for me ... that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that I, being one, should be out of harmony with myself.”

Plato



**Plato (428 BC - 348 BC)**

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**“It would be better for me ... that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that I, being one, should be out of harmony with myself.”**

Never underestimate the tsunami that's possible from the ripples made by an absolute genius born into the right place at the right time. When Socrates was brought in on trumped up charges and convicted to death, there was one creepy guy in a robe watching it all from the back of the room, and no one at the time could possibly have fathomed how important he would eventually become to human history. To them, he was a fly on the wall. To every subsequent human being born, he would be known as Plato.

To be honest, at first I resented Plato. *I* wanted to be the student of Socrates —why was Plato so special? But it doesn't take long when you're reading philosophy to get to know just how special a guy he was. A famous quote by Alfred North Whitehead even goes so far as to say,

**“The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato”**

The point of all this is that I am a complete moron. I made a huge mistake; I never should've written this book. How can one person fully catalog the effects of Plato in a single book? It's impossible. The story of Plato's influence in philosophy makes Frodo's journey with the ring seem like it was written on a post-it note. My dad was right; I will never be anything more than a second-rate version of him in everything that I do. The least I can do for you is explain why I chose to cover the information I did in this

book and saved the rest for the future.

When I first read Plato, I hadn't been studying philosophy for very long, and I understood very little of his work titled *The Timaeus*. It frustrated me at the time. Not only was there a huge generation gap between Plato and me, but the whole work is written in long soliloquies that give a speculative account of the creation of the world, nature, our place within nature, etc. I read *The Timaeus* and the companion dialogue *The Critias* close to a dozen times, determined to understand what they were saying, and I failed miserably.

I gave up. Don't judge me. I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life agonizing over what some guy thought about 2500 years ago. I moved on and eventually came back to a period a few hundred years later when the vast majority of philosophy consisted of people commenting on and expanding on Plato and Aristotle. It wasn't until I read these commentaries, the commentaries of the Middle and Neo-Platonists, that I fully understood much of Plato's views about the natural world. It worked for me, so it has to work for you.

Just by writing this book, I've already started trying to accomplish an impossible task. I might as well take a crack at it. As long as I'm trying, the best place to start is right where we left off with the trial of Socrates.

In the year 399 BC, Plato was leveled by heartbreak. He helplessly watched on the sidelines as the city of Athens went on a witch hunt and condemned his friend and teacher Socrates to death. Plato wasn't just personally mourning the loss of his friend, he was angry at the city of Athens—and rightfully so.

He knew Athens was better than this. He had lived there and seen first hand

when Athens was at the pinnacle of its golden age; when it was a city that prided itself on its democratic roots and commitment to reason. Now they were putting the most influential philosopher in history to death. It must have seemed like a tremendous fall from grace.

It was right around then that Plato decided he needed a change of scenery. Socrates was dead, he needed a new teacher anyway, why not take a vacation? He decided to travel the world and learn from the wisest people he could find: Euclides, Theodorus, the Pythagoreans—some say he made it all the way to Egypt.

This was Plato's equivalent of the movie *Wild Hogs*. You know, that movie with a bunch of middle-aged men who take a journey on some motorcycles, running into crazy people with no shortage of antics along the way. By the end of the movie, they've shared a lot of new experiences and learned some lessons along the way (like to never make *Wild Hogs 2*).

There is one key difference though. During *Wild Hogs*, I'm in the movie theater looking around and reaching towards the heavens asking, "Why?!?" for most of the movie, wishing they had cut out several scenes. In the case of Plato, it's the exact opposite. Everyone wishes they knew more about this mysterious journey. Where are the deleted scenes of Plato's early trip around the world?

We will never know what happened for certain, but one thing that's clear is that something incredible happened to Plato. There are many rumors. Some say he was sold into slavery. Some say he spent years studying the philosophy of Moses and finding a way to transmute it into something that would resonate with Greek culture. We will never know the truth. The only thing we do know is that something made him decide to return to Athens in

the year 387 BC and start a school.

He called his school The Academy. It stayed operational for over 900 years and is actually the origin of the word “academic” in modern times. It was the first organized philosophical school.



**Archaeological site where the Academy once stood. Love what they've done with the place.**

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George Sarton in his *A History of Science* (1952) describes the mindset that must have pervaded the members of the Academy, and of Plato himself as leader:

**“We can imagine that the Academy, which could be attended only by men of leisure, was a cradle of discontent. The author of the Laws was a disgruntled old man, full of political rancor, fearing and hating the crowd and above all their demagogues; his prejudices had crystallized and he had become an old doctrinaire, unable to see anything but the reflections of his own personality and to hear anything but the echoes of his own thoughts. The worst of it was that he, a noble Athenian, admired the very Spartans who had defeated and humiliated his fatherland. Plato was witnessing a social revolution (even as we are) and he could not bear it at all. His main concern was: how could one stop it.”**

At least the philosophers now had a place to congregate! Well, not exactly. You would think that if you considered yourself a philosopher, all you'd have to do is show up, fill out some paperwork, and you could get your membership card for the philosophical school; you were a lover of wisdom! But that wasn't good enough for Plato. You had to be more than that.

Plato wanted us to take the word “philosopher” more seriously. After all, what does it take to consider yourself a lover of wisdom? Is the guy who watches Jeopardy and gleefully claps as he learns a brand new fun fact a “lover of wisdom”?

You could make a case that he is. Plato doesn't have a problem with this guy, he just sees the two of them as very different people; Plato loves

wisdom a lot more than that guy loves wisdom. Plato isn't just learning new facts, he's creating the facts that the guy watching Jeopardy gets excited about. Plato is dedicating his entire life to the cause of wisdom; the other guy dedicates half an hour at 9pm/8pm central (check your local listings).

Plato wondered, "Why should we have one blanket term to describe two very different types of people?" Instead of the agonizing and pretty arrogant process of coining an entirely new term, Plato just makes a distinction. He wouldn't consider that guy a philosopher. He would consider him a sightseer; someone who enjoys wisdom for the practical benefits or the spectacle of it all, not for the wisdom itself. You were only a philosopher if you met this new, more rigorous criteria that was required.

It's for this reason that only true philosophers would be welcomed through the doors of The Academy, and in retrospect it was probably for the best. Nothing is more annoying than that guy who feels compelled to walk around and share his most recent fact of the day with you; those people would've ruined The Academy.

Someone I went to school with once told me that Plato's dialogues are kind of like crossover fan fiction. I think this is a great way of putting it. Crossover fan fiction are stories in which fans combine two worlds outlined in fiction into one crazy alternate reality and write stories about them. For example, what would it be like if Edward and Bella from the Twilight franchise enrolled at Hogwarts? Things would be pretty crazy. Every fourteen-year-old girl would absolutely lose her mind.

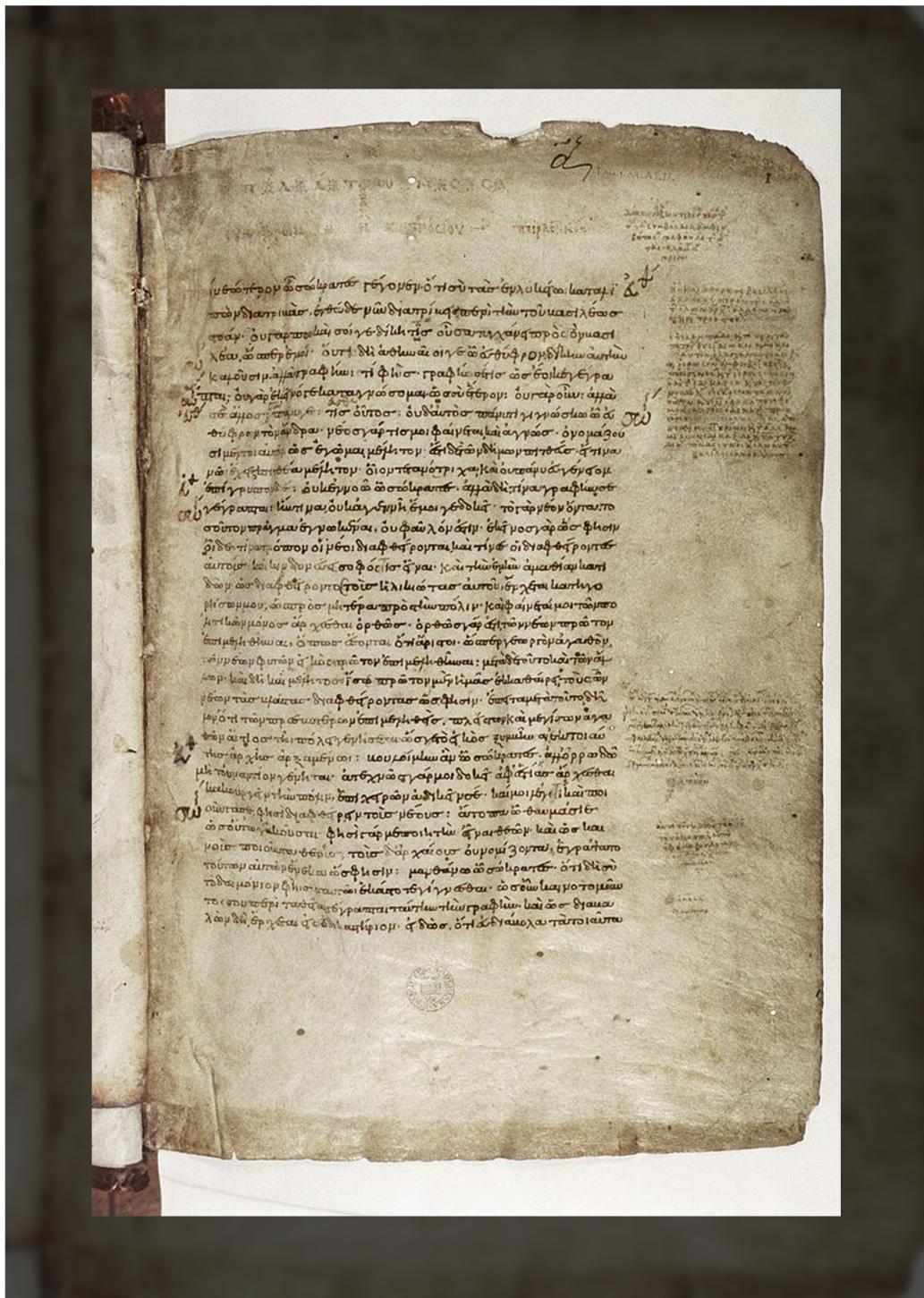
Plato did something very similar. He realized that nobody wanted to read a boring philosophy book. And trust me, most of the earlier ones were boring almost to the point of incoherence. Just Google "Heraclitus Fragments" if

you don't believe me. It is like reading the ingredients in Hamburger Helper. But no matter how boring they were for non-philosophers to read, Plato realized that there were some really important messages buried inside, and if only a skilled philosophical-archaeologist could excavate them, these messages would offer insights that could really help people.

Plato was committed to the cause of making his philosophy not only brilliant and innovative, but entertaining to read as well.

And he was great at it. He was so good, many historians think that aside from all of his revolutionary philosophy, just his writing alone is the best writing to come out of all of ancient Greece. The way he does it is masterful. Characters stand around having conversations with each other, and between the beautiful character development, humor, and storyline, he still manages to weave in fabulous philosophical concepts. Maybe the most impressive part of all is how well his writing stands the test of time. You could read a work of Plato's like *The Symposium*, and it wouldn't be laborious or obvious that it came from thousands of years before you were born. The fact that his work is still so easily readable and that it was intended to keep the interest of readers who essentially lived on a different planet than we do today, is an astounding feat to say the least.

The reason it so closely resembles fan fiction is that the characters in his dialogues were real people; they just weren't having conversations that actually took place. Sometimes the characters didn't even live during the same time period. He would take real public figures, real celebrities, and real philosophers and use them as a mouthpiece to deliver the multiple sides of an issue within the framework of a fictional story.



Sometimes looking at original pages of the scroll or really old re-printings can put in perspective the time and culture difference that separates us from these ideas. This is a page from Plato's work Euthyphro.

As you can imagine, there are certain characters that are going to be recurring no matter what subject you are writing about. One is the comic relief, another is the ignorant person, but most importantly, especially if philosophy is involved, you need the quintessential wise person. This is the person who is the voice of reason. When Plato himself had thoughts on a particular issue that he wanted to inject into these stories, this is the character that would speak on behalf of him. Can you guess who he chose as the quintessentially wise person in all of his dialogues? Socrates.

It's easy to write this off as arbitrary. Plato needed a character. Why not Socrates? But what he was doing was very deliberate. As we know, Socrates had a pretty nasty reputation after all the smear tactics and the hate that came his way, all of which came to a pretty extreme climax at the moment when they actually sentenced him to death for corrupting the youth of the society.

Plato was not going to let this be the legacy that Socrates left behind. Plato knew this smeared reputation was no where near representative of his old friend and mentor, so in an attempt to revise history to be more accurate, he typecast Socrates. In Hollywood today, certain actors play the exact same role in every movie they play. They become that character so frequently, no matter how much you tell yourself that they're playing make believe, part of you always thinks of those people as the same people they play in the movies.

Michael Cera is a good example of this. If I saw him walking down the street, I would assume he is a meek, reserved person that sits down when he pees. But that is based on absolutely nothing. I don't know Michael Cera, I just assume he is that way because he plays that character really well.

Michael Cera could be a complete lunatic with unbridled confidence, what

do I know?

Plato was making Socrates the wise, admirable Michael Cera. It was a great plan to give people a more accurate depiction of Socrates, but unfortunately, the trade-off was that it gave us a less accurate depiction of Plato himself. Here's the problem: Plato was a philosopher, and so was Socrates. Socrates never wrote anything down. By making Socrates the all time quarterback of his dialogues, it can be hard sometimes to discern where Socrates' philosophy ends and Plato's philosophy begins. Historians and fans of philosophy might get a little peeved about it, but Plato himself wouldn't have cared. His goal was accomplished: to keep the spirit of Socrates alive—the ever-changing ever-questioning spirit of the Socratic method.

One of the most stimulating and awesome examples of Plato's philosophy, the one work of his I would recommend everyone read in full, is *The Symposium*. The word "symposium" meant a drinking party in the context of ancient Greece, but it can be thought of as a word meaning a meeting where some issue needs to be discussed. Although the entire book is a story that takes place before, during, and after a dinner and drinking party, the real subject that Plato wants to discuss with this book is love.

Love is something that captivated the ancient Greeks. It seemed like an incredibly special state of mind; it not only made people smile and laugh and be the happiest they'd ever been, but it also had the potential of being a dagger in your heart. There are very few emotions that elicit such a wide range of feelings, so it's no wonder why it intrigued them.

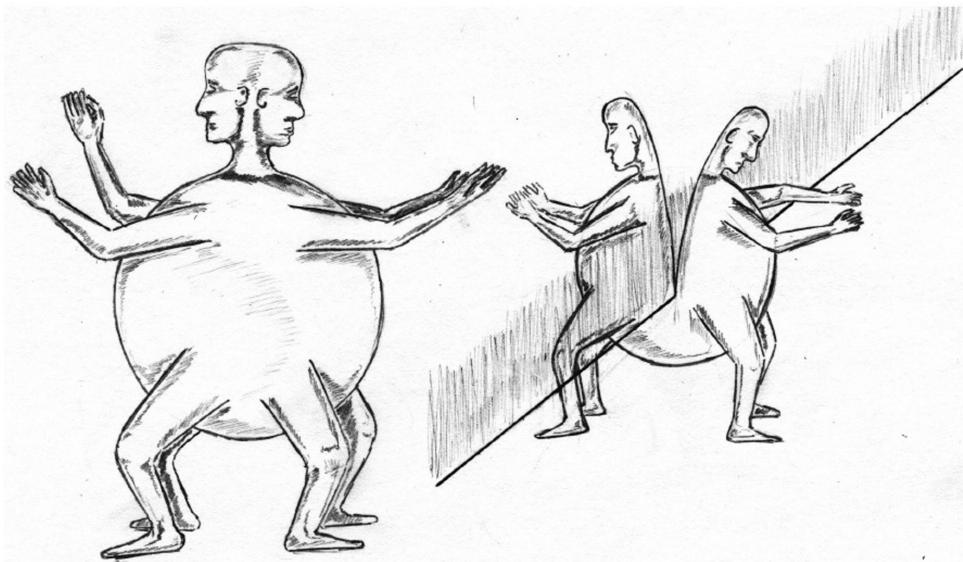
Let me just summarize the events that take place in the story as a launching pad for future discussion:

This symposium was a fancy dinner party where several local dignitaries and great thinkers all came together to eat and then take turns standing up in front of the room and giving their take on the nature of love, the hope being to arrive at some deeper level of understanding about it after the fact.

Socrates, fittingly, arrives to the party late because he lost track of time on a neighboring porch when he was deep in thought about something. All kinds of people were at this dinner party. There was the great general Alcibiades, the famous playwright Aristophanes, and they all had their own tremendously flawed views about the concept of love. But Plato makes Socrates the last guy to give his take on the concept.

I think this was deliberate. I think that Plato wanted people nodding in agreement throughout the entire book. He thought, "I'll lay out a bunch of common pedestrian opinions about what love is, and then when the reader thinks we've finally arrived at the truth, I'll cut their legs out from underneath them and show them how foolish they are when it's subjected to the fine tooth comb of philosophy."

Aristophanes, being a playwright who writes comedy, gives a quasi-humorous and metaphorical account for what love is. He talks about a time long ago when men and women were actually fused together. We had two heads, four arms and four legs, and we would roll around everywhere. Also, there were three genders back then. You could be all male, all female, or "androgynous," which was half male, half female. Just when it starts sounding like an episode of Jerry Springer, he starts to throw in the cartoon parables.



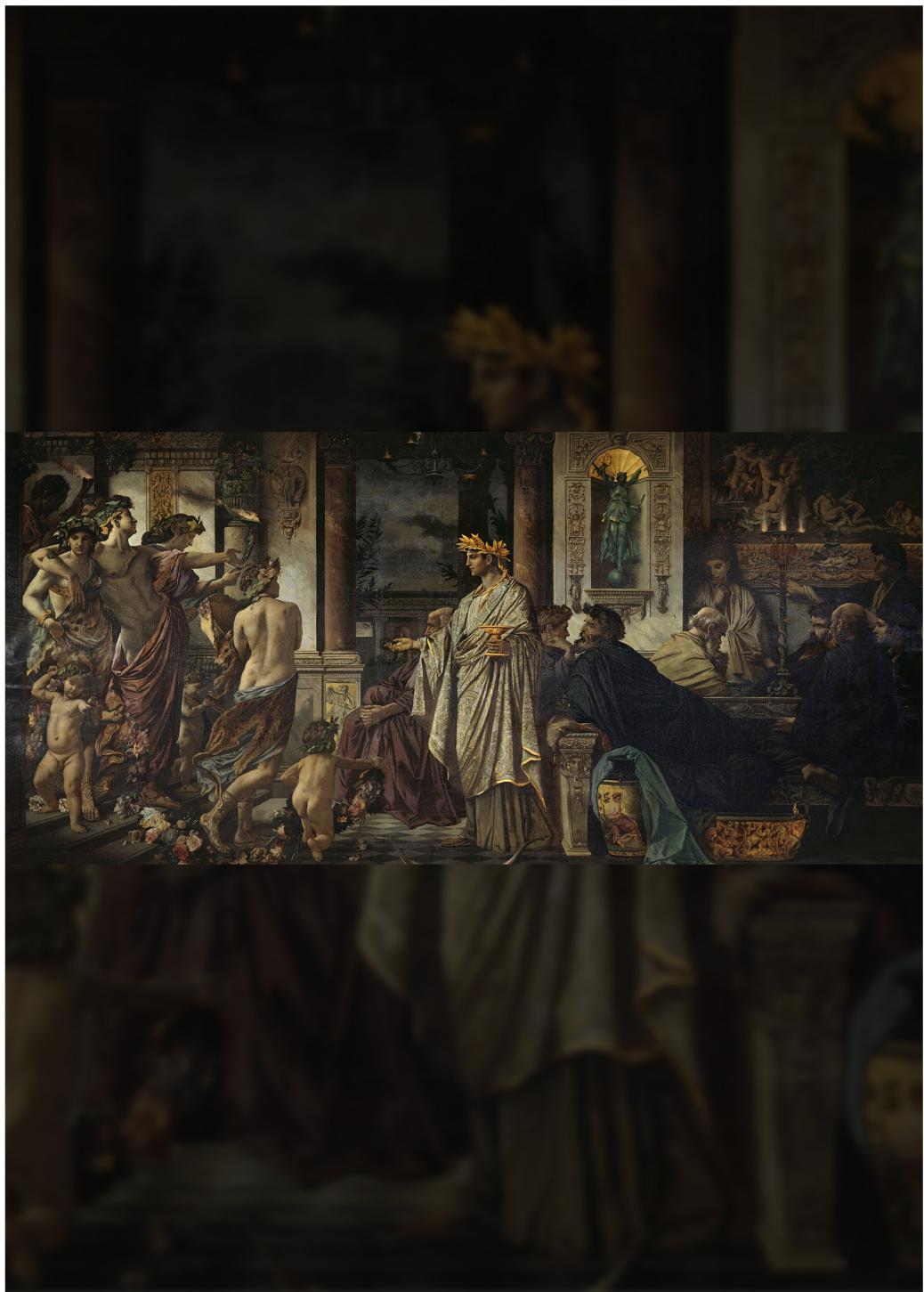
The reason we feel attraction towards other people to Aristophanes is because at one point we were attached together as one, and the attraction we feel is us seeking our other half again. No doubt a pointed humorous myth, but that's what the guy did for a living anyway.

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The males descended from the sun, the females descended from the earth, and the androgynous couples from the moon. Apparently, we were a little feisty when we had four arms, and we tried to take over the god realm. Zeus got mad at us for trying, and decided he was going to throw lightning bolts at us and kill us all, but fortunately for us he thought better of it.

Don't get Zeus wrong, he wanted to kill us, but he didn't want to deprive himself of all the offerings and sacrifices that humans were giving him at the time. So he pulled a Buzz Lightyear, set his lightning bolts from kill to stun mode, and instead merely separated us in half. If you think about it, this is actually better for Zeus, now he could get twice the offerings he was getting before.

Aristophanes says that whenever we feel attraction to someone else, what we're really feeling is the desire humans have to find and return to their original other half. They may find them at the beginning of their lives, they may seek them out for their entire lives without ever finding them, but Aristophanes thinks the urges and feelings that attach us to people is our way of trying to get back our other half that was taken from us. He says, this is why people often say that they feel "whole" when they are in love with someone. This is why people think of their significant other as their "other half". This may seem like yet another fairy tale, but consider it this way: Aristophanes believes love is actually a quest—a pursuit to fill areas you're lacking in that were once yours. When you think of his account of love that way, you're left with a lot to think about. At least, I am.



**Painting of a scene from Plato's Symposium by Anselm Feuerbach. Right as Alcibiades slams through the door, drunk out of his mind. Someone get this guy a lamp shade.**

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It's interesting to read some of the ideas about the origins and consequences of love, but by far the person who everyone at the dinner party is waiting in suspense to hear from is Socrates. He begins by saying that he agrees with Aristophanes on a couple things. He agrees that love is a quest, but he can't bring himself to get behind the whole story of the hermaphrodite jigsaw puzzle. To Socrates, we love someone or something because we find it to be beautiful or good. To explain why he feels this way, he tries to break down the concept of love which he claims to have been educated about by an old priestess.

**“Beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may.”**

Man seeks immortality. We're born into a condition where we're not going to live forever, and we hate this fact. So what we do in this life is try as hard as we can to find alternative ways to achieve immortality. He thinks we do this in a few different ways. The most common way we do it is by having children. You plant your genetic code into someone else's body and nine months later, a small piece of you goes on to have their own kids who go on to have their own kids, and in this way, a piece of you has achieved immortality. The only way this plan fails is if there is some sort of mass extinction event or some distant relative of yours has a very long, unfortunate succession of wing-men.

Another way we strive for immortality is by trying to do something really noteworthy so that our name gets written down in the history books. This could be any number of things: becoming president, finding the cure to

cancer or being the first person to walk on Mars, to name a few. We may think we're doing these things because we're competitive or because we just love helping people, but we also may just be doing them subconsciously so that we never have to face the finite nature of our existence.

The last way we might try to be immortal is by creating some incredibly important body of work that future generations hold up in high regard. Examples of this include writing *The Symposium*, composing twelve symphonies, or making an incredibly mediocre podcast trying to get people to think about stuff.

Plato thinks that in all three cases, we are creating offspring. Sometimes they are biological, sometimes they are in text form, but all of them are offspring. The biological offspring is made with someone you love and the text offspring is made to attract that person you love, like colorful feathers in the tail of a peacock.

What is beauty? What makes us feel love toward someone? Beauty is far more than physical attraction. Plato says that you might walk around in a daze thinking that you are in love with a beautiful person, but in reality they themselves aren't beautiful. They are an inferior, second-rate copy of an ideal form of beauty. It's this ideal form of beauty that you're attracted to; you just see little pieces of it in them and are drawn to it. When most people talk about being in love, this is where they find themselves. But this can't be all there is when it comes to love. I want to hear about real love! The ideal form of beauty that I'm somehow connecting with when I say I love someone!

**“And the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the**

**sake of that other beauty, using these steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is.”**

To Plato, love is like different steps on a staircase. It can be broken down into a few different stages, each stage leading to the next stage and eventually coming to a head at the appreciation of the ideal form of beauty itself. Let's take a step back and talk about that process. It all starts with something we're all very familiar with: a love of the person's body.

Plato would call this “eros,” or erotic love. This includes sexual attraction, thinking the person is attractive, and all the rest of the things that encompass what Plato thinks is the generally shallow stage of love that we just talked about.

Most people don't get this far, but Plato says that after a while of being in this state, you eventually realize that someone you think is beautiful has a lot in common with all the other people or things you think are beautiful. At this point, the person you once were infatuated with that you felt this love towards isn't as spectacular anymore. They're not as much of a rare Pokemon. There are tons of them. Plato thinks once you realize this, you realize that all the variance that the body can have that makes it beautiful is nothing in comparison to the variance that makes the soul beautiful.

At this point, the yardstick you use to measure beauty changes dramatically. Physical attraction becomes unimportant; now it has everything to do with their personality, even if that personality exists inside of a mangled or ugly body. Plato says that once you get here, then you begin to transcend even the personality. You stop loving individual people or things that inhabit an

individual body; you start to love even broader things like concepts. You fall in love with things like the arts, or laws, or biology. Then finally, at the end of the staircase, you are capable of recognizing that what you were really in love with all along were not the individual people or personality traits or fields of study like biology, but the thing common to all of them, the ideal form of beauty itself.

Plato makes the case that although it is difficult to climb the staircase, this is really the best place to be. The reason is that when you are in love with a single human being, you are massively vulnerable. There's nothing ensuring they'll stick around. They could die. They could fall in love with someone else. They could go live on a farm upstate like my dog did when I was a kid. This life is volatile and painful, as opposed to the top of the staircase where you love something eternal and unchanging. It's never going to give you up or let you down.

But here's the catch: the ideal form of love is eternal. It doesn't need you. It's never going to love you back, and your relationship is such where you are fully aware of that. You are content with that. This is what is commonly referred to as "platonic" love, and in case you're wondering—no, that sixteen-year-old kid on *Dawson's Creek* has no idea what he is claiming to have towards that girl he's known since he was five.

Plato agreed with Socrates that one of the most important concepts philosophers should occupy themselves with is the question of what anything actually is. After all, how can you philosophize about justice if you don't even know what justice really means?

Plato took the question one step further. My guess is, after being a student of Socrates for so long and being driven to insanity after pulling his hair out for

so many years trying to arrive at a solid definition of anything, Plato raised the question that if we did, theoretically, arrive at the perfect, eternal definition of one of these things, would we even be able to recognize that we did? How can we know the difference between the real truth and what our flawed reasoning or perceptions are tricking us into thinking is the truth?

He wondered about this for a long time. He wondered about this for so long when it comes to intangible concepts like virtues, he started asking the same questions about everyday items.

What do we mean when we are talking about a tree? Is there a perfect definition of what the essence of a tree is? Plato thought that just how there is an elusive and difficult to define version of what justice is, there's an elusive and difficult to define version of what a tree is.

One society's definition of what justice is can be thought of as an inferior, second-rate copy of what true justice is. Similarly, one individual's interpretation of a random tree can be thought of as an inferior, second-rate copy of what a true tree is.

He thought that if it was possible to arrive at this perfect definition of a tree, we would be able to understand what it means to be a tree. We would know what the essence of a tree is. Let's explore what Plato is talking about here because it can be a little difficult to get our heads in the place his head was at when he wrote it in 380 BC.

Plato would no doubt start by asking you to find and examine the nearest tree. He would say that when you look at that tree, it is obvious to you that it is a tree. Oddly enough, you could walk through a forest full of all different kinds of trees and be able to tell without any trouble that you are surrounded

by only trees despite the fact that not one of them is entirely the same as another. There are small trees, big trees, thick trees, trees that are bent, trees that are uprooted, bonsai trees, magnolia trees, palm trees, you name it. Plato would point out that although there is a massive difference between a redwood tree and a bonsai tree, for some reason we don't have any problem instantly identifying that they are both trees. Why is that?

Plato says that what we are identifying in these trees that makes it obvious to us that they are trees is their essence. We can call this feature, whatever it is: tree-y-ness. Whatever makes a tree a tree; the essence of a tree that is present in all of the trees regardless of shape, size, height, or type.

But let's say we could arrive at that tree-y-ness and discover the end all, be all perfect definition of what the essence of a tree is—the perfect tree. You can picture it glowing and flawless in every possible way with a chorus of angels singing a church hymn behind it. That tree would never exist in the real world.

Plato said that the perfect form of a tree, along with the perfect form of every other type of thing in existence, including things like justice and beauty, exist in what he calls “The World of Forms.” It was a world completely separate and more real than this physical world that we live in. In fact, everything in this physical world; trees, dogs, buildings, computers, and even you, are just inferior copies of their ultimate form which exists in that magical realm that he called “The World of Forms”.

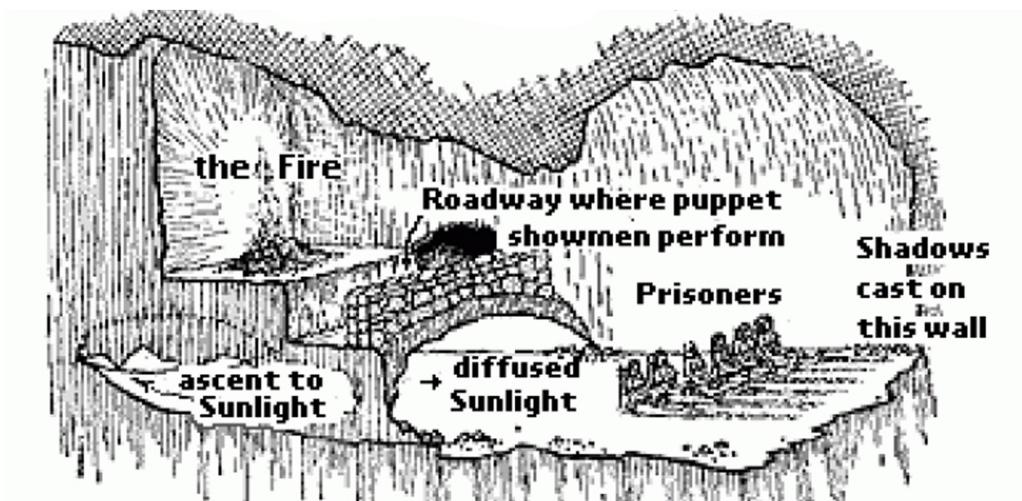
This concept is known as his “Theory of Forms.” Typically, when I'm giving these explanations, this is the point when I would have to come up with some sort of modern day comparison to make something very weird easier to understand. Lucky for me though, Plato did it for me. But I want to

make one thing clear before I continue: if Plato wasn't dead, I would never use his example—that's just bad job security. He explains how this theory of forms is relevant to you through his famous “Allegory of the Cave”:

Here's how he begins it:

**"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."**

Plato wants us to play make believe for a second. Imagine if from the moment you were born you were held prisoner inside of a dark cave, tied up and forced to face the deepest, darkest back wall of the cave. Now imagine a massive fire burning brightly behind you. This fire casts shadows of you and the other prisoners tied up around you, and these silhouettes dance on the back wall of the cave. Imagine there is also a pathway between you and the fire where people walk by every so often and hold up everyday items—a tree, a dog, etc.—and on the back wall of the cave, you and the other prisoners see the shadows of these objects. Plato says that if you talked to the prisoners, they would have no idea about the world that's going on behind them. As a prisoner, you've never truly seen yourself or truly seen any of the trees, dogs or other items these people sporadically hold up. From birth, the only thing you've ever seen or known about are the shadows of the actual items being cast on the cave wall.



A visual of Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave. What we see in the physical world are merely shadows on the cave wall.

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The point of this extremely anticlimactic story is that our lives as humans living on planet Earth are not unlike the lives of the prisoners shackled to the walls of the cave in the story. When we see a tree or a dog in the physical world, we aren't seeing the true form of a tree or dog, we are seeing an inferior physical copy of one. Everything we see in our everyday lives as humans is like seeing the shadow of the actual item on the cave wall. The good news is there is hope. We are not destined to live out our lives as prisoners helplessly shackled.

Plato continues by asking us to imagine that a prisoner manages to untie himself, turns around, and looks at the actual items; he sees the fire, or in some translations he leaves the cave and eventually sees the sun, which symbolizes complete truth. At first, he would be confused. His eyes, having never seen light like this, would strain at the sun, and most likely he would turn back around and stick to the shadows on the wall because it's the existence he's comfortable with. It's the existence he's used to. Despite knowing it's completely artificial, he would willingly live as though the shadows were the true reality because it's the only existence he's ever known. Not to mention, he'd probably feel really dumb that he'd been sitting there since he was a baby and could've untied himself the whole time, but didn't realize it.

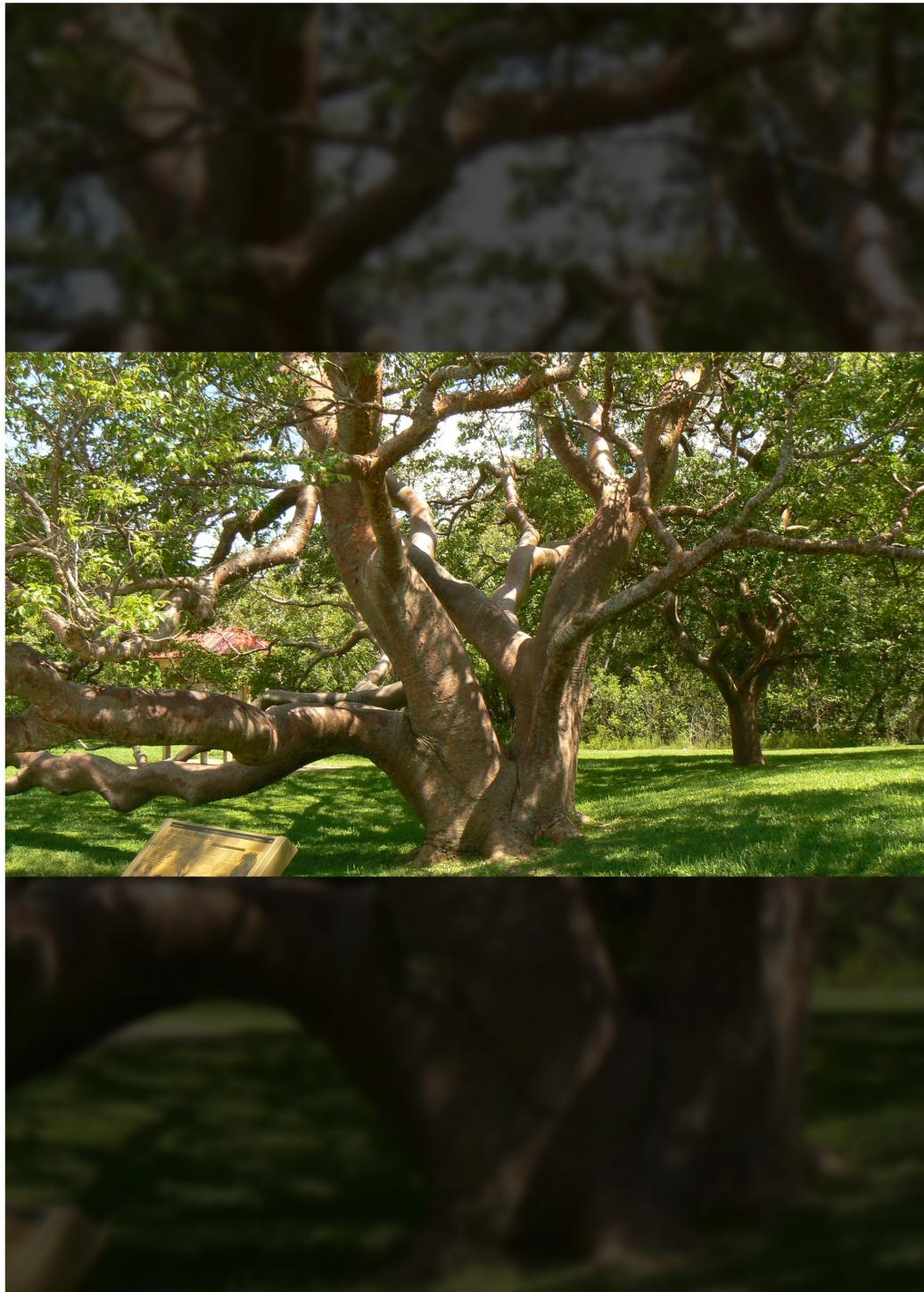
Plato thought that everything on earth that we had the ability to perceive with our senses had a corresponding form in the world of forms. When we see something as we go throughout our lives, we are seeing shadows on the cave wall. The only way to know what something truly is is to "untie yourself" and turn around to see it for what it actually is. And the only way you do that is by using reason to arrive at that perfect definition of the thing and understand its true essence.

**“And at first he would most easily discern the shadows and, after that, the likenesses or reflections in water of men and other things, and later, the things themselves, and from these he would go on to contemplate the appearances in the heavens and heaven itself”**

Obviously, Plato's theory isn't perfect. If we were all in seventh grade and were assigned to write an expository essay making an argument for why Plato is wrong, the first place most people would attack is his magical world of forms. I mean, come on. Magical, ideal forms of trees and dogs and humans floating around in some world we can't see? Give me a break.

But in reality, this may have not been something Plato meant literally. There are many incredibly smart commentators who say he was probably just stating, albeit in a very melodramatic way, that concepts like justice or beauty exist independent of just actions or beautiful things. They say he probably realized that when most people are asked to define beauty, they often mistake beautiful things with the essence of beauty itself. It's true, he did speak of a different heaven-like world where the forms existed, but he may have really just been marking a contrast between considering what a beautiful thing is here and now and what the eternal unchanging definition of beauty is, regardless of time and place. He may have just been speaking metaphorically about these ideals existing at all.

Maybe a better place to begin our assault as evil seventh graders is to attack Plato's theory at its base. Is it even possible to ever know what the ideal form of something is? Is there any real way for us, as mere humans, to distinguish between reasoning to an imperfect form of a tree or a perfect one? But even this Plato had an answer to.



**What makes a tree a tree? If we ever found the perfect form of a tree, would we even know  
that we had found it?**

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Although we don't realize it, Plato believed that we all innately possess a full understanding of every form in the world of forms. When we are born, we are born with two parts. The body and the soul.

To Plato, the body is just the car that our soul drives around in, but it's kind of like a 1998 Hyundai with 300,000 miles on the odometer and some ketchup stains on the passenger seat. Our physical bodies are precisely that: physical. That means they are a part of the crude, physical world. But the soul is different! The soul is eternal. The soul is how we reason. According to Plato, at one point our souls lived within the world of forms, and it's like a five-year-old kid who went to Disneyland once. Ever since it left, it's been dying to go back, and it won't stop bugging us until it gets to.

The point of this is that when we use our senses, that is just the means our flawed physical body uses to perceive something like a tree. We need to use our soul to reason and remember the form of a tree. Like many ideas in this book so far, modern readers might read this and pass off his theory of innate knowledge as mere superstition—something only necessary to validate the rest of his hocus pocus worldview. But he wasn't just grasping at straws, trying to come up with something to justify the rest of his philosophy. He actually gives an example of a situation in the real world that made him think we were born with total knowledge of everything at birth. In one of Plato's dialogues, Socrates demonstrates that knowledge must be innate by teaching a young slave of one of his friends some basic geometrical concepts:

**"Come now, try to tell me how long each side of this will be. the side of this is two feet. what about each side of the one which is its double?"**

**Obviously Socrates it will be twice the length.**

**You see Meno that I am not teaching the boy anything but all I do is question him and now he thinks he knows the length of the line on which an eight foot figure is based do you agree?**

**I do.**

**And does he know?**

**Certainly not.**

**He think it is a line twice the length**

**Yes.**

**Watch him now recollecting things in order as one must recollect, tell me boy do you say that a figure double the size is based on a line double the length? Now I mean such a figure as this not long on one side and short on the other but equal in every direction like this one and double the size, that is, eight feet..." - Plato in the character of Socrates**

Socrates continues to not tell the boy anything directly, but just point him in the right direction of the answer. When the boy deduces the correct answer, Socrates claims to have demonstrated that the only explanation is that the boy had the answer in his head all along, and that what we think of as learning is really a process of remembering. Agree with Plato or not, you can at least appreciate where he is coming from.

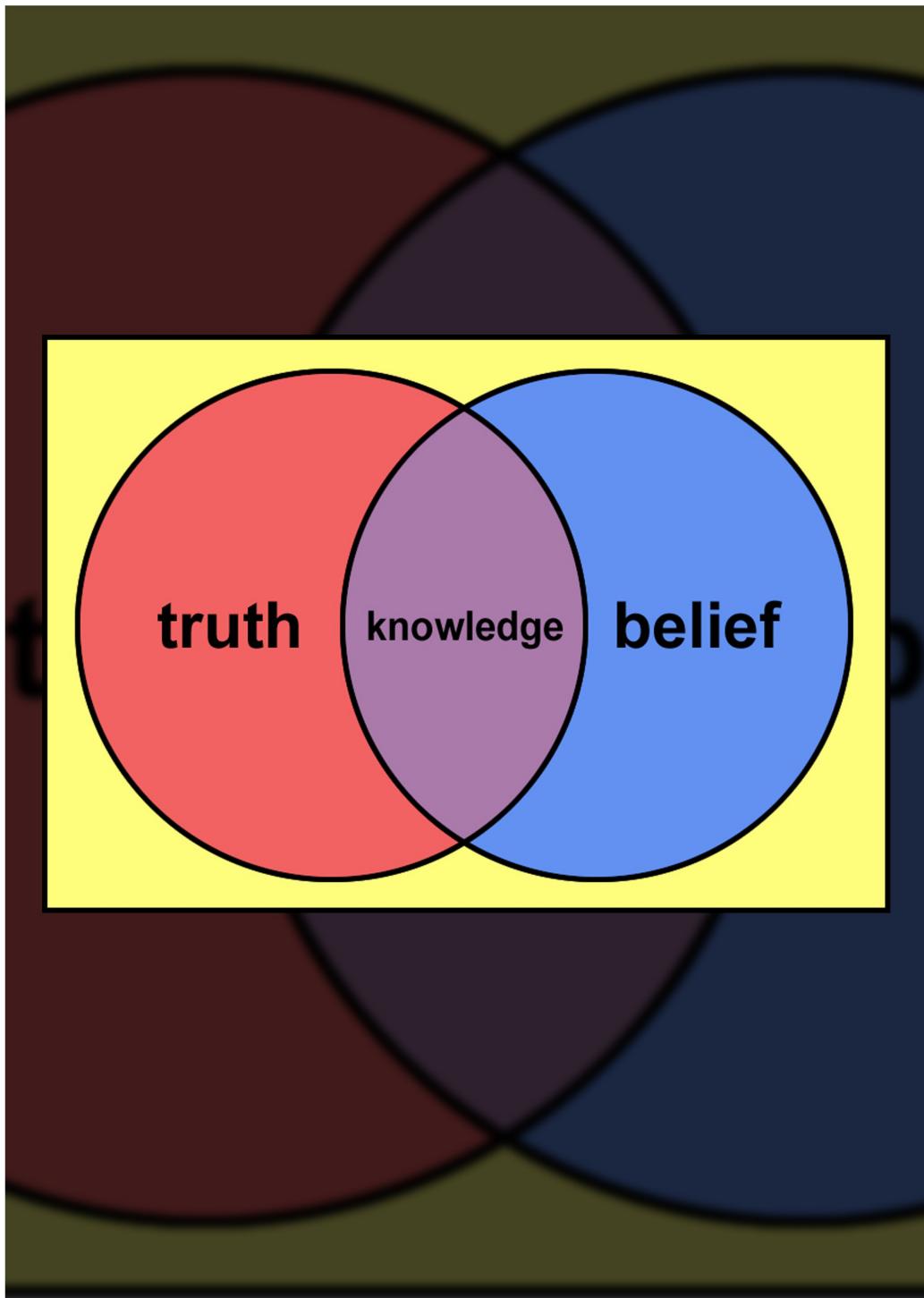
The theory of forms may seem a little weird. That's because it is. If you gave him enough time, Plato himself may have agreed with you. The theory went through several different stages where certain aspects of it changed throughout his life, and this is probably because other philosophers would argue with him about it and Plato would adapt it. Regardless, his theory of forms can be seen as one of the earliest and most profound breakthroughs in Epistemology. Epistemology, simply put, is the branch of philosophy that concerns itself with what we know and how we know it.

However, I want to remain fair and balanced in this book, and I would be irresponsible if I didn't mention the fact that there is a strong and growing contingency of philosophical historians who come to Plato's defense.

"Come on!" they say, "Plato wasn't a moron; of course he knew there wasn't some magical world where the perfect 'forms' of everything exist!"

These people argue that all Plato was doing was acknowledging that there must be a perfect definition of a tree, no matter how elusive it may be to us human beings. This perfect "essence" of a tree obviously doesn't exist in the physical world, but that doesn't mean it doesn't exist at all. It has to exist somewhere; even if it is only in the minds of people adept enough to arrive at it.

These people say that Plato's "world of forms" is just his way of articulating that everything we see around us has an ideal form that it is a flawed representation of. It's one thing to listen to Plato hypothetically and make a New Years Resolution to one day in the distant future actually start trying to think about the essence of things and get to the bottom of what makes a tree a tree. It's another thing to actually do it.



**Venn Diagram of Plato's theory of knowledge. For something to truly be knowledge it needed to be a justified, true, belief. You can imagine the placements of beliefs you currently hold.**

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Just as a thought experiment, imagine what the world might look like if you actually did what Plato and Socrates suggested. If you succeeded, how might these insights change the way you view the world? How might understanding what makes a tree a tree change the way you see every tree you come across? How might understanding what makes a human a human affect the way you see the people you come across? Is there some essence to a human that is identifiable? If the answer is yes, how might it affect the way you treat them? I know this can seem very abstract at this point, but I promise, if you continue your philosophical education, you'll understand the significance of what this thought experiment is in due time.

At least Plato remains consistent. Just as he thought it was possible to use reason to arrive at an ideal, best definition for things like beauty or justice or trees, he also thought it was possible to use reason to arrive at an ideal, best form of government. A quick word of warning for anyone looking to have their political beliefs reinforced by Plato: he was not a big fan of democracy. In fact, he thought democracy was one of the worst forms of government.

I know I live in a post WWII world, and I'm supposed to pretend like democracy is a perfect system and that to even consider any other system should warrant me being shot on the White House lawn, but I actually agree with a lot of Plato's criticisms of democracy. It's not like the guy was just lazily throwing out criticism or had an ax to grind with democracy or something. On the contrary, Plato spent years of his life contemplating the problems that governments typically faced and he just noticed that when it came to democracy in particular, one big problem that it always seems to run into is that it's absolutely terrible at electing competent leaders.

That's not to say it never happens! Even a broken clock is right twice a day,

but we can see why Plato would focus on this electoral process in particular. It really does make or break a society.

**“When the citizens of a society can see and hear their leaders, then that society should be seen as one.”**

This doesn't just apply to government; the importance of leadership applies across all systems. You can have the greatest system in the world and if it's executed by con-artists, it probably isn't going to go that well. You can have the greatest scientific method ever devised by mankind, and it can be instantly desecrated by a few guys in suits that are interested in selling more penis enlargement pills.

In this same way, it doesn't matter how good a system of government you have; if it's ultimately carried out by inept or incompetent people, society will suffer for it. Now you may be saying, this is far from revolutionary! In a democracy, we totally realize that, which is why we have a filter in place to ensure we get the best guy for the job; it's called an election.

The problem for Plato is: when we have an election in a democracy, are we really getting the best guy for the job in office, or are we getting the winner of a popularity contest? Because the two do not necessarily correspond with each other.

To Plato, a democracy feels great for the average citizen. They're invested in the future of the country. They feel like they're making a difference. They feel like they are choosing the people who will be making the decisions at the highest levels of government. But to Plato, something we may need to be willing to accept is that, as average citizens, we may not be the most qualified to make decisions about who is the most qualified to make

decisions on our behalf. And that is a terrifying flaw in the democratic process.

If you've ever voted for a presidential candidate thinking that the world was doomed if the other guy won, and then the other guy won, you can at least at some level relate to what Plato is talking about here.

During the 2012 United States presidential election, the paramount issue that was supposedly going to decide the election was the economy. Who was going to fix the economy? Who had the better plan? I spent a couple hours doing my due diligence—trying to be a good citizen. I went to both Romney and Obama's websites and strained my eyes reading their long, itemized plans to “fix” the American economy.

After about an hour of looking at what may as well have been hieroglyphs, I realized something: what in God's name was I looking for? I don't know how to fix the American economy! How arrogant could I be? Because I read some Adam Smith and a few books on the 2008 economic collapse, now I'm an authoritative voice on the future of the American economy? What do I know?

I still needed to make a decision, though. I remember thinking, “Maybe I'm unqualified to determine who the best economist is between the two, but that doesn't mean everybody is as naive as I am. To be a good citizen, I must outsource this decision to somebody more qualified than me.”

Fortunately, I had a friend in the economics business. This guy was the real deal. This guy had a Ph.D. in economics, and after working as an economist for a while, he was shopping around and deciding which major university's job offer he wanted to accept.

Just to put it in perspective, this guy listened to the Freakonomics podcast and corrected Steven Dubner on some stuff; he was legit. I called him with child-like wonder in my eyes. Finally someone who was a consummate expert in the field of economics. Who better to educate me on which plan was more effective at actually getting more ex-real estate agents their new jobs at Taco Bell?

I called him, and I explained to him my plight. I comedically depicted myself trying to read their competing economic plans, and when I had softened him up a bit, I finally laid the big question on him: whose plan was going to fix the economy?

What he told me left me in a state of abject shock.

Apparently, he had no idea how to fix the American economy either. Apparently, he didn't even know which one of their two plans was more feasible. Apparently, there are so many moving parts and so many unknown variables in the future to contend with that there are literally thousands of different directions that we could go. The hieroglyphs that I was reading before were a detailed description of one of those directions that is based on hundreds of assumptions and mounds of conjecture, and the events that will determine which specific plan will work better or worse are contingent on things that are completely based on speculation that no one can possibly know for sure. Apparently, I used the word “apparently” too much as well.

He told me that he legitimately could not say with confidence what the better plan was, or that either of them were better than the potentially thousands of other options we have at our disposal as a country. In short, he said he didn't know who he was going to vote for.

I was dumbfounded. What I would give for a picture of my face when he told me; it must have been hilarious. If I saw an alien saucer shoot down from space and abduct my dog as he was relieving himself outside, I probably would've been more composed.

This guy had just dedicated 20 years of his life educating himself in the field of economics, he was revered as a notable figure in his field, and he had such a level of proficiency that universities were recruiting him to teach the next generation of economists, yet he still had no idea where to even begin fixing the American economy?

This was a sobering reality; a reality that made me look at the world differently. It was hard to keep a straight face anymore when someone listened to fifteen minutes of Rush Limbaugh and thought they had the skinny on how Obama's economic plan was a surefire path to serfdom. It was hard to take someone seriously who watched an episode of Bill Maher and spent the next three weeks trumpeting the obvious flaws in Romney's plan to expand relations with Latin America. More than ever before I saw what Plato was talking about.

The average citizen already has a lot on their plate. They have a full-time job, a home to maintain, immediate family, extended family, friends, hobbies, personal maintenance, and hopefully a few free minutes at the end of it all for some much needed recreation time. The average citizen doesn't have time to become an expert in the field of economics; they don't have time to comb through the complex geopolitical chess game that has been played by every country over the last several hundred years; they don't have time to become educated in agriculture, social security, federal law, the postal regulatory commission, military strategy, environmental preservation,

the tax code, the department of labor, education, or any of the other dozens of fields that their vote influences. If an expert can dedicate their entire life to one of these fields and still not fully understand how to enact progress, is the average citizen, an expert of none, the most qualified to be deciding the future of the country?

**“Democracy, which is a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike”**

Just because democracy isn't perfect doesn't mean we need to throw it out completely. Remember, Plato is criticizing every form of government in an attempt to use reason to hopefully arrive at the best one possible. Democracy may seem the most fair, and it may make people feel involved in their community when they exercise their right to vote, but it is far from perfect.

Plato points out something about democracy that is very difficult to argue with: what inevitably happens is that the people who are elected to public office are not necessarily the most qualified, altruistic, effective, experienced, or even the most well-intentioned; they are the best at winning public approval. The one skill set common among all public officials is that they were better than their opponents at convincing people that they were better for the job; actually being a good president is as unrelated to winning an election as being a good musician is to winning a Kid's Choice music award on Nickelodeon.



**Plato thought it was practically impossible for people coming from a life of partying and decadence to ever become wise, so why do we willingly pull our leaders from this rich stock of ignorance?**

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For Plato, the sad reality is that the skills people acquire that make them amazing at winning popularity contests don't always lend themselves to being the leaders of the free world. Also, because these skills take time to develop, these positions of power are often times reserved for people who come from a wealthy background. This is another problem for Plato; we severely limit the pool of people we have to pull from. Here he talks about the lifestyle of abundance that these people live:

**“Such was the conviction I had when I arrived in Italy and Sicily for the first time. when I arrive and saw what they call there the "happy life" a life filled with Italian and Syracusan banquets, with men gorging themselves twice a day and never sleeping alone at night, and following all the other customs that go with this way of living I was profoundly displeased. For no man under heaven who has cultivated such practices from his youth could possibly grow up to be wise, so miraculous a temper is against nature or become temperate or indeed acquire any other part of virtue.”**

Plato points out that for someone living this unrealistic lifestyle, it's impossible to grow up to be wise. They're just not living in the real world. They're living in a fantasy world where they never desire anything for any length of time. Think about that: to never desire anything? To always get exactly what you want? That's not real life. If you were creating a machine someone would live in that would cultivate the environment that would produce the ideal leader, those aren't the kind of conditions you'd want! That's not the kind of life that leads someone to reflect and have a strong conception of morality, but Plato thinks that's an essential quality of a good leader. In other words, the best leaders of societies would be philosophers:

**“I saw clearly in regard to all states now existing that without exception their system of government is bad. Their constitutions are almost beyond redemption....Hence I was forced to say in the praise of the correct philosophy that it affords a vantage point from which we can discern in all cases what is just for communities and for individuals, and accordingly the human race will not see better days until either the stock of those who rightly and genuinely follow philosophy acquire political authority, or else the class who have political control are led by some dispensation of providence to become real philosophers.”**

Plato talks about his idea of an ideal state in his famous work called *The Republic*. The book starts out like many of Plato’s works: with a heated dialogue. Socrates is talking to a guy named Thrasymacus who is taking Socrates to task on the concept of morality. Thrasymacus sees Socrates waxing on about the importance of being virtuous all the time, but what is this virtue that Socrates holds in such high regard?

Thrasymacus says that Socrates is wasting his time arguing for the merits of morality. To Thrasymacus, morality is nothing more than a set of rules imposed upon the weak by people with enough strength to force the rules down their throats. The point of morality is just to keep people down. After all, anyone who acts immorally and gets away with it is always better off than someone who acted morally in that same situation—nice guys finish last. His main point was, knowing that fact, why would anyone ever choose to live a restrictive life like Socrates? If you can get away with something, Thrasymacus says you should do it and enjoy the spoils of your lack of effort.

At this point, Socrates freezes and doesn’t know what to say. For whatever reason, he has no idea how to argue against him in the moment. I’m sure

we've all had conversations we look back on immediately after they end, and only then think of the perfect response we could have had. I will lay on my death bed in agony thinking of some of those conversations.

Either way, Thrasymacus brought up some good points. Shortly after Thrasymacus leaves, Socrates commissions the help of his friends to play devil's advocate. He knew for certain that he disagreed with Thrasymacus, but he didn't know exactly how to refute what he said. Socrates asks his friends to defend the opposition at all costs to help him get to the bottom of why he disagreed with it.

What Plato does next truly illustrates his genius. Just revel for a second in the raw ambition of what he is about to do: he is about to attempt to solve two of philosophy's biggest problems simultaneously. The character of Socrates explains how the benefits of being a moral person are undeniable, but maybe the best way to fully appreciate them is when they're looked at in a broader context (i.e., the benefits of being a moral or just system of government).

For the first dozen or so pages, Plato talks about things that a state would need to have to truly be considered ideal. He has plenty of basic stuff he mentions that makes perfect sense, but I'm not writing a book about academics. So let's get to the interesting stuff.

One really cool concept he thinks would be an integral part of an ideal society is that people should be assigned a vocation not based on what is available in their socioeconomic class, but based on their individual talents. If someone is born with a predisposition to solve math problems well, in Plato's republic they would become a mathematician. If someone is born with a passion and talent for pottery, they would become a potter. If

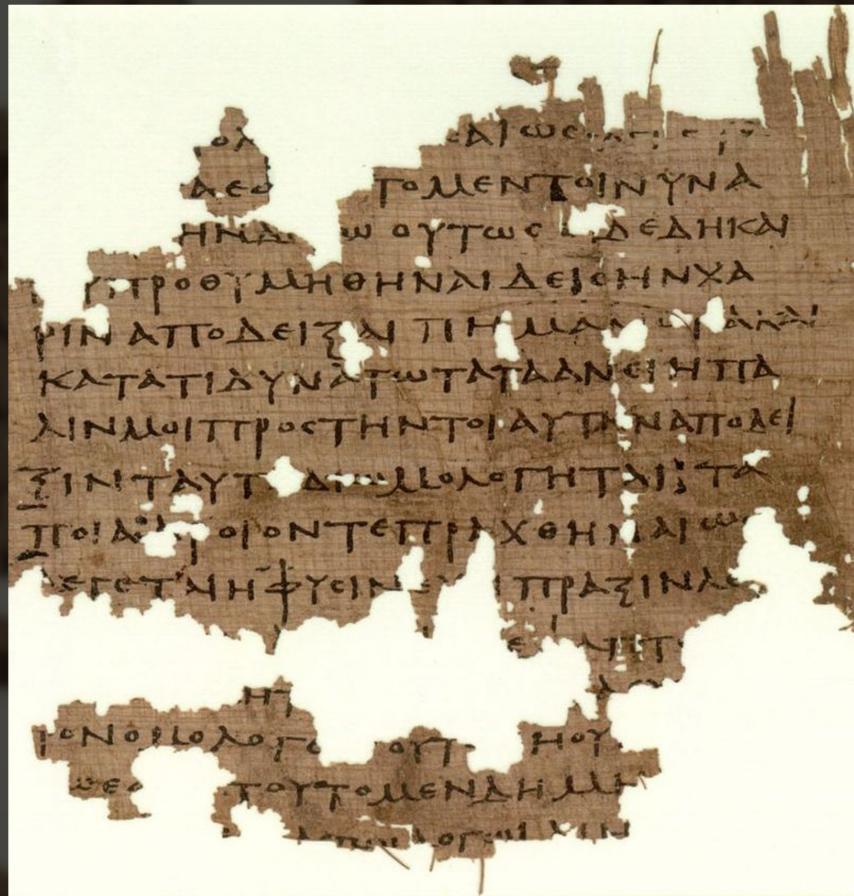
someone was born completely devoid of any sort of discernible talent, they would become a podcaster who begged for donations.

I think it's worth pausing for a second to think about exactly what Plato is getting at here. There are a lot of really interesting conversations to be had if we were actually thinking about enacting this sort of thing.

It seems both horrifically coercive and tremendously ahead of its time simultaneously.

On one hand it is scary; what if you are born with a predisposition for writing poetry, but you absolutely hate writing poetry? Are you thereby sentenced to a lifetime of writing angry love sonnets? That sounds like a recipe for cutting your ear off. On that same note, is anyone in the entire world born with a natural gift for breaking their back toiling away in the fields? How do we fill the jobs that no one is passionate about doing but are unquestionably necessary?

On the other hand, this notion is extremely progressive. Plato has managed to foreshadow modern workplace productivity studies by more than 2000 years. WARNING: I want you to stop reading and find some tape or saran wrap or something to roll tightly around your head, because what I'm about to tell you will very likely make your brain explode due to a state of pure shock. It turns out that people perform poorly when they hate their job. It turns out that when someone feels like their job is pointless, they do their work as though that were the case. Who would have guessed?



**Fragment from Plato's Republic. I have to brush up on my ancient languages, but I think I see the words, "This will never actually work, guys."**

Plato seemed to realize that when people hate their jobs to the extent that when their shift is over they gracefully slide down the tail of a brontosaurus and scream “Yabbadabbadoo!” it’s not just bad for them; it’s bad for society. The more work that gets done, the more progress society makes, so Plato thought if the state had the ability to facilitate productivity, it should do so by any means possible.

But this isn’t even the best part of the plan! Here is an interesting question to consider: how much human potential has been squandered over the course of history because of the current and traditional ways that humans are assigned a vocation? How many potential Albert Einsteins have pulled around a rickshaw in a third world country over the years? How many potential Beethovens have become accountants because they were pressured by society and their parents to “get a real job”? Consider how different the world would look today if the function of a state throughout history had been to nurture the positive growth of society, rather than to collect tax dollars. Imagine the world today if our species had learned this lesson from Plato more than 2000 years ago.

This idea never ceases to remind me of a powerful scene from the 2007 movie *300*. Though the scene itself is a Hollywood fabrication, the entire movie depicts the real historical political lead up to the battle of Thermopylae.

Legend has it that the government of Sparta forbade King Leonidas from getting involved in the Greco-Persian war beyond a skeleton crew of 300 Spartans. Leonidas, knowing how hopeless his situation is, marches his men to Thermopylae, the famous geographic choke point where their low numbers would be punished the least against the tens of thousands of troops

that Xerxes had at his disposal (Herodotus said Xerxes may have had as many as 2.5 million). Regardless of the exact figure, Leonidas and his men knew that they were marching to certain death, and on the way to this narrow mountain pass where they planned to make their final stand, they come across a group of Arcadians who had heard about the conquest of Xerxes. The Arcadians brought all they could. They knew their city-state faced a life threatening crisis, but they were baffled to see that the Spartans had only brought 300 men.

Baffled might not be the best word for it; they were perplexed beyond words. Were the Spartans crazy? How could they ever hope to win a battle against hundreds of thousands of warriors with just a few hundred to work with themselves?

In a scene that vividly paints the picture of the power of Plato's focus on professions based on predisposition, Leonidas approaches the baffled and concerned Arcadians, who at this point had grown quiet, and asks a question.

He asks one of the Arcadian soldiers what his profession is. He answers back confidently, "I'm a potter, sir."

He asks another man nearby, "I'm a sculptor."

He points to another, "Blacksmith."

Leonidas stops for a second, turns to his 300 soldiers and screams, "Spartans! What is your profession?" All three hundred of them thrust their spears violently in the air and make a sound that even chimps at the zoo would be scared of. Leonidas turns to the Arcadian leader and says, "You

see old friend, I brought more soldiers than you did.”

A potter or a sculptor is no more equipped to fight a battle than a Spartan warrior is equipped to whittle a figurine out of a piece of drift wood. Think of the efficiency you potentially lose by not taking advantage of the natural gifts of your population!

Plato recognized this, but this wasn’t the only potential being squandered in Plato’s eyes. What if I told you there was another resource being completely squandered—an absolutely massive resource. One that was available ubiquitously to every society, yet had been largely squandered by almost every society that had ever been created up until this point in history. Can you guess what it is?

I have a prize for those of you who independently arrived at what Plato did: the female half of the species.

**“Then there is no pursuit of the administrators of a state that belongs to a woman because she is a woman or to a man because he is a man. But the natural capacities are distributed alike among both creatures, and women naturally share in all pursuits and men in all.... Shall we, then, assign them all to men and nothing to women?**

**We shall rather, I take it, say that one woman has the nature of a physician and another not, and one is by nature musical, and another unmusical? ... Can we, then, deny that one woman is naturally athletic and warlike and another unwarlike and averse to gymnastics? ... And again, one a lover, another a hater, of wisdom? And one high-spirited, and the other lacking spirit? ... Then it is likewise true that one woman has the qualities of a guardian and another not.**

**Were not these the natural qualities of the men also whom we selected for guardians?"**

I am a fan of history, and I try to be pretty understanding when it comes to obvious things that early man dropped the ball on. The earth is flat—understandable. A pantheon of magic gods who explain things we don't understand—a common mistake. But I will never understand how the leaders of these tribes and city-states couldn't see just how much potential they were squashing by subjugating women.

Straight out of the gate, you're cutting your productivity in half. For hundreds of thousands of years, the human species was trying to cook a Hot Pocket with the defrost setting on the microwave. I could be broadcasting my podcast from Mars right now, but instead I get to look at some statues. How could these cultures not realize how severely they were handicapping themselves? If a single aggressive Germanic tribe took this insight to the extreme, I would be typing this while running my fingers through my Hitler mustache.

Although some people disagree with giving Plato credit for equal treatment of women in his republic, it is very clear that he at least supported the idea of women being able to improve their lot in life just as much as men—which was a revolutionary concept for 350 BC.

Plato thought that the ideal society would be divided into three classes. The lowest of these would be called “the producers.” No, Plato doesn't mean the people that do absolutely nothing and take all the credit for every movie that hits the big screen (regardless of how ironic it is that they are some of the lowest, darkest, most detestable people in modern western society). The

producers in Plato's republic are the working class. Farmers, blacksmiths, potters, and various other artisans would fall into this category.

The other two classes are called "the guardians" and "the rulers." To understand the functions of these two classes, we need to first reconsider for a second Plato's belief that it is often poor leadership that leads to the downfall of society.

Plato didn't like the idea of people campaigning to become a leader. Things just get muddy too quickly. We can't read each other's minds, so how can we ever be sure what someone's true intentions will be once they become leader? In fact, Plato thought the more interest someone expressed in wanting to be a leader, the more you should proceed with caution. No, in fact the less someone wanted to be a leader, the better Plato thought society would turn out under their leadership.

It's funny how the way Plato approaches finding a leader is the exact opposite of how he thinks we should approach finding jobs for the rest of the people in society. It's also funny how similar this thinking is to the founders of the United States. When the founding fathers erected their new system of government and were desperately trying to move away from power-hungry monarch rule, it was common surrounding the formation of the country for candidates running for president to deny any remote interest in the office. People were scared to vote for you if you wanted to be president too badly. What a stark contrast from our world today when candidates spend hundreds of millions, go on a world tour, and besmirch the other guy's character just for the possibility of being on a ballot.

As we touched on before, the filtration process that we use in a democracy for choosing our leaders is called an election. Plato didn't think it did the job

well enough though, so he created his own, unique filtration process to find the leaders of society. This is where the guardian and the ruler classes come in.

These two classes were Plato's method of cultivating great leaders for the state. Only the most adept and capable guardians were chosen to become leaders, and the guardians were a class of people under heavy restriction from the moment they were born.

If you were a guardian, your childhood could be seen as a sort of boot camp, but instead of making you into a soldier, they were making you into a great leader. You would live a communal lifestyle. You were forbidden to touch or own gold, silver or other valuables. You were held to a strict diet and exercise regimen. The state would even monitor every poem or story you read to ensure there weren't any instances of moral corruption that might rub off on you. In fact, every story they allowed you to read must have some hero or protagonist who acts in the way a future leader would need to act. As a guardian, you were educated from your earliest years for decades on all the different subjects that would give you a full tool belt in the event you ever became a leader. If after all of this training you were deemed to be one of the best of the best, maybe, just maybe you would have a chance at helping to make decisions one day.

This is where Plato begins his comparison between the behavior of a human and the behavior of a government. Just as a human body operates at its best when all of its various parts are working correctly, a government works best when all of its parts are working correctly as well.

Just as the government has three parts (the producers, the guardians, and the rulers), the human soul also has three parts that ironically correspond with

the different parts of the ideal state.

The first part of the soul is what Plato called the Appetitive. It has to do with, you guessed it, appetite. It manages all of the different desires we have for sex, money, or material possessions, which is just like the producers who work on menial, everyday tasks to get things like sex, money, and material possessions.

The second part of the soul is the spirit, which seeks fame, honor, and glory. This directly corresponds with the guardians who live a noble, disciplined life in order to achieve a higher place in the world.

The third and final part of a human is the rational portion of the soul. The ideal human should quell the desire to seek money, fame, and glory and instead focus on the use of the rational portion of their soul. The ideal decision-maker of the state is one who has cultivated their ability to reason so diligently that they understand the weight of every decision they make.

Who better to enact justice than someone who actually understands what justice is, not just some facsimile or relegated form of justice? How many problems in our world today can ultimately be traced back to a decision point where one person made a choice based on a relegated form of understanding about a problem?

**“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 have rest from their evils...”**

Just as food for thought: imagine if we side-stepped the moral implications of dictating what a child's life would be from birth and imagine we could execute Plato's vision of cultivating leaders. Now imagine there was a parliament of these ideally cultivated leaders—maybe twenty or thirty of them. Twenty or thirty profoundly wise philosophers who had spent their entire lives dedicating themselves to learning about science, economics, diplomacy, philosophy, history—imagine them making all of the decisions for the future of a society.

If we could guarantee that world, which we can't, but if we could: would you be willing to forfeit your say in the direction of your country's future? Would you be willing to let go?

Would you maybe, focus more on your family and enjoying your recreation time, yielding to the professional discretion of this elite group that is obviously more qualified to deal with these issues than you are? In the same way you don't consider yourself an expert on cutting your own hair and you yield to the professional discretion of your barber who has spent a large portion of their life doing nothing but cutting hair—could you do the same with decisions that affect the future of the country?

If your answer to this question is still a resounding no, you probably would cite human nature as your reason for having an aversion to being out of control. And this is understandable—look at history! Absolute power corrupts absolutely. It is human nature to use the power you have for your own selfish, often immoral purposes. We can never trust people with that level of power over the population, no matter how much training they've been through since they were children.

Well, what if we removed the human nature element from it altogether?

What if, instead of being governed by a council of people that, admittedly, may one day be corrupted, we were governed by a computer that took the collective wisdom of humanity and an infinite capacity to calculate outcomes and made the best decision possible in keeping with the limitation of human suffering? Now obviously, this paragraph could be an entire book, but I think there's more to our aversion to relinquishing control of our political future than just our fear of human nature. I think I agree with Plato in that it is at least possible to imagine a world where great leaders could be purposefully cultivated.

If a single Abraham Lincoln can be cultivated by accident, how many could be created on purpose if we put our minds to it?

**“Let every man remind their descendants that they also are soldiers who must not desert the ranks of their ancestors, or from cowardice fall behind.”**

CHAPTER

# 10

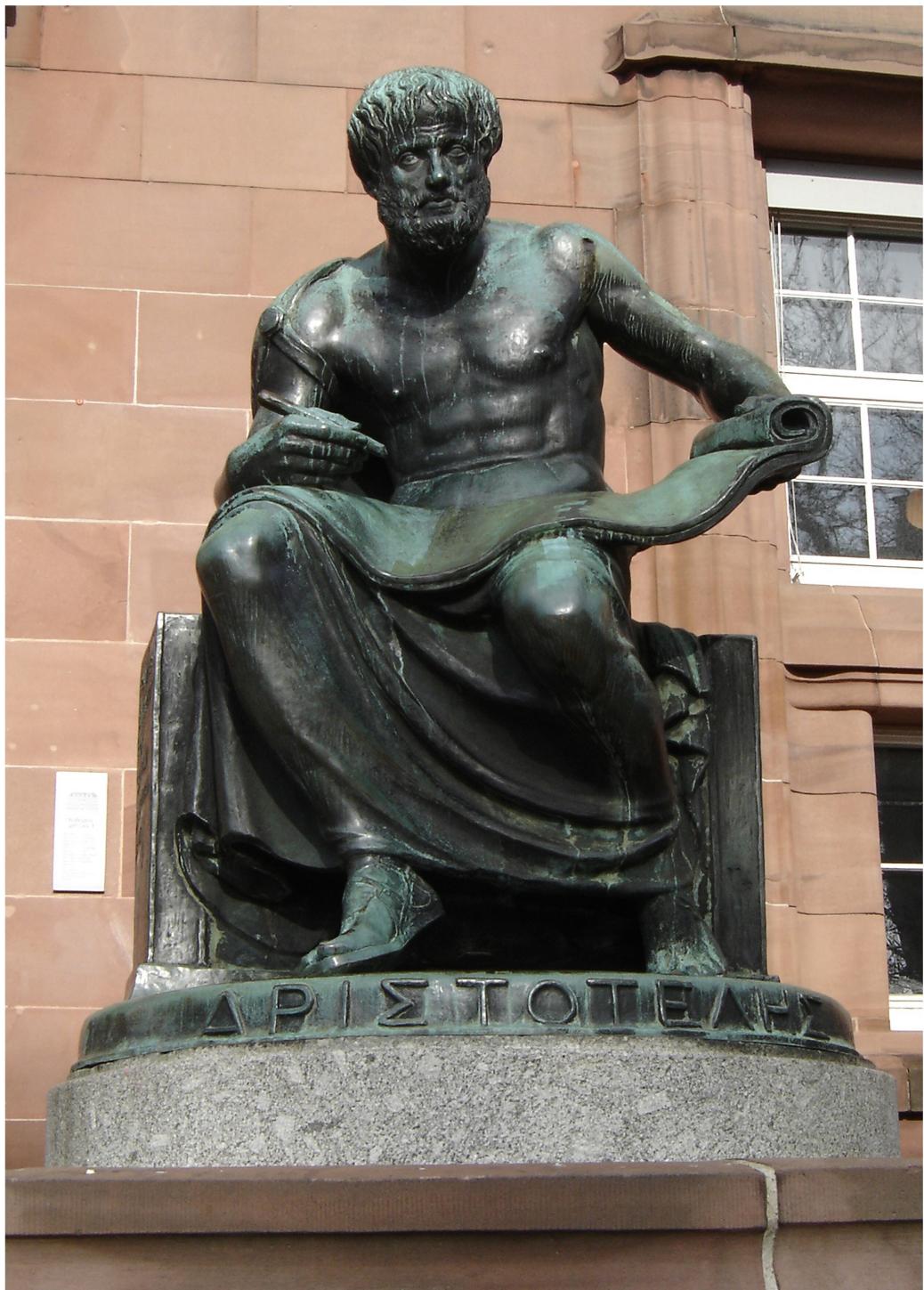
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ARISTOTLE

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...  
“The greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor.  
This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make  
good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances.”

- Aristotle



**Aristotle (384 BC - 322 BC)**

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**“The greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances.”**

When historians of philosophy look back at the works of Aristotle, they notice something fascinating. There are always two categories when you look at the work of philosophers from that time period: work we can still read today because it survived throughout history and has been re-translated, and “lost” works which have been destroyed by war, attrition, competing world views, or just generations of lazy librarians—who knows?

But what historians have noticed about Aristotle’s work in particular is that the surviving works we can read and study are titled in a very different style than the “lost” works that commentators have mentioned throughout history. What they conclude from this is that Aristotle must have initially written a collection of entertaining scrolls aimed at making his philosophy more palatable to the masses, but after centuries of wars and cultural changes, all we are left with are fractions of what seem to be lecture notes Aristotle wrote when teaching at his school called The Lyceum. But even the lecture notes we do have are far from a pure interpretation of the thought of Aristotle. The scrolls, and eventually books themselves, changed hands multiple times over the centuries and were tainted as a result.

In fact, someone could make an entire movie just about all the different ridiculous places Aristotle’s books and scrolls ended up after he died. The short story is: Aristotle died and left his full body of work to his student Theophrastus. Theophrastus kept them until he died and then left them to a

guy named Neleus of Scepsis. Neleus then, for some reason, transported the scrolls from Athens to Scepsis and buried them underground somewhere where they sat until around the first century BC. Some accounts say that he merely kept them in his cellar, but either way it's ironic and almost humorous that the works that make up our understanding of one of the greatest philosophers of all time were at one point sitting underground for centuries.

Eventually Apellicon of Teos bought and exhumed Aristotle's work, brought all the works back to Athens, and decided that he was going to try to repair some of the damage that the work had incurred over the years from traveling around so much. Being a guy who prided himself on his rich understanding of exactly where Aristotle was coming from during his time and culture, Apellicon felt while repairing the works that he was qualified to take the liberty of transcribing them as well. Unfortunately, history didn't think he was as qualified he did, and most of the changes he made are seen as an even greater distortion of Aristotle's thoughts.

As though this weren't enough, when the Roman general Sulla occupied the city of Athens in the year 86 BC, he allegedly found Aristotle's new and improved works, and hauled the entire collection back to Rome where they changed hands several other times and eventually were published.

So in a world where Aristotle is typically revered as one of the most dry, boring philosophers to read in history, let's remember: we are reading fragments of lecture notes. Aristotle wasn't even trying to write something entertaining when he wrote this stuff. Needless to say, if I turned on the news and heard that someone found one of his lost works, I'd probably faint the same way my mom did when she saw John Lennon.

The point of all this is that we can think that reading Aristotle is boring and resent the fact that all we have are lecture notes intended for his philosophy students, but I think we should thank our lucky stars for even having access to anything at all given the volatile, often subterranean history of the books. His entire body of work essentially took a multi-century vacation around Europe, and returned home with a couple of limbs missing and zero sense of humor. I'm fortunate it wasn't burned or lost along with the works of so many other early Greeks. I'm fortunate it didn't find itself in the hands of religious zealots before it was able to be reconciled with the church. I'm fortunate we have the little we do have because one of these insignificant fragments of his lecture notes was so extraordinary, it completely changed the way I look at the way I live life. It was called *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

One of Aristotle's main goals when he wrote this book was to make a case for what he thought the best way to live life was. As you can imagine, this was a pretty overwhelming task, so he decided he wasn't going to start out by giving his method right away; instead, he started out by pointing out common mistakes that people make. And what becomes very obvious to the reader is that Aristotle thought the vast majority of these common mistakes were committed by people who were young and stupid.

For example, one of the biggest mistakes people make is simple: They don't have a plan.

If you don't know where you want to go on the map, how can anyone possibly give you directions for how to get there? That sort of existence is lazy and comforting, because you can never fail. It doesn't matter which direction you take a step in; it can't be considered wrong because you have no idea where you're going.

This is something young people do a lot. Aristotle points out that most people spend their early years with no real sense of direction. Young people are far more concerned with their short term plans than their 401k plan. They'll make a plan to go to the movies this weekend. They'll make a plan to ride jet-skis around the lake. But they won't spend much time thinking about where all of these fleeting activities are ultimately taking them.

To be fair to young people, they don't need to. Most of them would say that the very reason they are making plans to have new experiences is because they are trying to figure out which direction they want to eventually head in. But no one would disagree that the earlier they arrive at the decision of which direction they're traveling, the further they'll eventually have the ability to go in that direction.

For example, if you had any sort of apprehension in your youth about committing to a career path, think about how much further along you could be if you were able to start a few years earlier than you did. Now, I'm not saying to get down on yourself for this; for most of us this is impossible. You needed every single one of your previous life experiences to get you to the place where you could decide on which path to choose. But imagine how much further along you could be if it were possible. The only point of this is that finding that ultimate destination on the map as soon as possible is a very important part of life to Aristotle, and he thinks we naturally start to head more in that direction.

What inevitably happens is that as we get older we start thinking more about our future. Now we know the destination, now we know where we're trying to go on the map, so now we can take deliberate steps towards getting there. But to Aristotle, something cool and slightly unexpected starts happening as we get older—we even start putting more thought into menial, individual

decisions that we make.

Instead of slumping down on the couch, we pay attention to our posture. Instead of eating Doritos and frozen food, we start eating for the sake of longevity. Instead of living paycheck to paycheck, we start putting away a nest egg for retirement. We may still take vacations or slot out time for jet-skiing on the weekends, but our lives become noticeably more calculated the older we get. Your days of blacking out and waking up in the drunk tank of the local police department are comfortably in the rear view mirror. Well, not quite comfortably.

**“The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion, and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else.”**

Aristotle thought that if you want to have any hope at all of living life well, the first thing you need is a plan. This in itself is far from revolutionary.



**Site of Aristotle's famous school of philosophy: The Lyceum.**

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Have you ever tried to get good at something? I'm not talking about dabbling in a hobby or being a weekend warrior; I'm talking about working for hours and hours each day to try to become world class at something. Have you ever been through that process, worked hard every day, seen significant improvement, and then gone back and watched a video or recording of how you looked at the beginning? To quote a nice gentleman who reviewed my podcast when it was first released, you must have looked like "a whole other level of cringe."

If you weren't so embarrassed watching yourself, you'd probably burst out into laughter at the sheer stupidity of it. You had no idea what you were doing. You could point out dozens of mistakes that you were making without knowing it because at the time you had no idea about the contingencies you had to account for.

Someone just starting out in boxing might drop their hands in certain cases because they haven't been in enough fights to understand the threats they expose themselves to with certain movements. Someone who just started playing the guitar might play the notes of a scale with two notes per string because it seems intuitive or immediately easier for them. But later in their development, when they're learning to seamlessly flow between different modes of a scale, they might wish they had developed the three note per string dexterity from the beginning.

Here is an insight that can change the way you look at everything you do: the more mastery you achieve at anything, the more purpose you have behind each individual, seemingly insignificant action that you take.

An amateur will watch a professional and take hundreds of things for

granted. A single motion of a professional can be accounting for countless possibilities that an amateur has no way of understanding with their limited experience. Imagine watching a football game with an NFL Hall of Famer. Even if you've watched football your entire life, you are watching a completely different game than he is. He understands the history, coaching, strategy, mind games, on-field tactics, psychology, physical limitations, weather conditions, and a thousand other things on a level that you can only dream of. Where you see arbitrary happenstance, he sees deliberate action.

**"Any one can get angry — that is easy — or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for every one, nor is it easy."**

So Aristotle's notion that we need to arrive at a plan may not be revolutionary, but once you arrive at that plan, it's this level of mastery he calls on us to strive for. For Aristotle, to live life well is to understand every action you take towards executing that plan on the level that the NFL Hall of Famer understands the football game.

This may seem convoluted. Let me explain what I mean with an example from my life where Aristotle reached his bony hand out of the ground and smacked me across the face.

I love scrambled eggs. I just do. I don't know whether it's the ease of preparation or the calorie to nutrient ratio that makes me so attracted to them, but for whatever reason I've made scrambled eggs virtually every morning for years.

Doing it every morning for years, I developed what I thought was an incredible system. I was so proud of it, I would execute it with a smile, like I

was the villain from a cartoon twirling my non-existent handlebar mustache. It was great!

I would start by heating up the pan. While that was heating, I would crack the eggs into a bowl and whisk them profusely. I'd add a little salt and pepper, maybe a splash of almond milk. I'd put the butter at the bottom of the pan, then add the eggs. I'd come back a couple minutes later and toss them around, and I'd always know they were perfectly cooked as soon as I heard the smoke detectors start going off. I'm trying to be funny here, but I seriously thought I was really good at making scrambled eggs. I would put my scrambled egg system up against the best in the world, if anyone cared about a competition like that.

So you can imagine the arrogance that filled my head as I was combing through YouTube one day and in the recommended videos section was a video of Gordon Ramsey teaching the world how to make scrambled eggs. I scoffed. I may have even tossed my head back and laughed a little. This I had to see. Look Gordon, I may not know how to make a Tiramisu with a balsamic reduction demi-glace like you can, but I can make me some scrambled eggs. What could he possibly tell me that I didn't already know? Watching this video gave me some sort of egg-related inferiority complex.

Firstly, Gordon Ramsey doesn't put butter at the bottom of the pan. He just cracks the eggs into the pan and puts the butter on top of it because it gives the eggs a "lovely velvety finish."

He doesn't add salt and pepper to the eggs beforehand because the seasoning apparently starts to break down the eggs and turns the finished product into something "quite watery and dreadful." My eggs are watery and dreadful? I am offended at this point.



**Oil painting of Aristotle by Francesco Hayez in 1811.**

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He says to never whisk the egg beforehand. You whisk it in the pan because one of the biggest amateur mistakes you can make is to "break it down beforehand."

Then this bastard spiked the ball on me; he doesn't even cook the eggs the same way I do.

He has this super advanced method of cooking where he just keeps putting the pan on the stove and then taking it off, constantly stirring the eggs "like a fine risotto."

Then he starts pulling out his professional chef wizard potions and adds some stuff called crème fraîche to his eggs so they don't overcook. I had never even heard of crème fraîche. Just for the record, with my newly lowered scrambled egg self-esteem, I googled it. Apparently, it's a French version of sour cream with a little more fat in it.

My point is this: all these seemingly insignificant things I take for granted, all these things I mindlessly execute while cooking scrambled eggs for no real purpose, are mistakes. Gordon Ramsey, through decades of cooking experience and wisdom has achieved a much higher level of mastery at cooking scrambled eggs than I have, and is therefore much better at it than I am. The crazy thing is, I wasn't even aware of how little I knew! On the contrary, I thought I was an expert! How many people go through life doing things with a similar level of unfounded ignorance?

What Aristotle would want us to think about is that when I decided on a plan to make scrambled eggs and arrogantly concluded that I'd achieved a level of mastery at it when I actually hadn't, the only thing at stake was some

poorly cooked scrambled eggs. When you do this with your approach to life, everything is at stake.

Aristotle says that as we use reason to develop priorities, eventually we combine all of these priorities into a plan for living. Gordon Ramsey's plan was to cook scrambled eggs, and through years of practice he arrived at a set of actions that insured success in that plan. We, as human beings, should try to arrive at a similar set of actions that insures success in whatever our plan for living is.

But how can Aristotle so wantonly throw out life advice with such a broad brush? We are far too diverse a species for one guy to be able to write a book that can account for every possible walk of life someone can choose, right?

Aristotle thought that no matter what your individual priorities were or what your individual plan for living was, ultimately you would be striving for the same end goal as everyone else: to live well.

Aristotle breaks down the things we do into two categories. The first category is things that we do to live. These include things like eating, drinking, and exercising. If we didn't do these things, we would die. The second category is things we do to live *well*. This includes everything else we do that isn't strictly necessary for staying alive, but which makes our life better in some way.

As you can infer by my use of the words "everything else," this category is very broad. But one example for the sake of clarification would be education. We educate ourselves because we want to live well. We don't educate ourselves because we would die if we didn't; we do it because that

education might allow us to yield better lives for ourselves.

Let's stop and reflect for a moment: think about the things that you do everyday, and try to identify which of these two categories they fall into. Aristotle says that if you do this long enough, you notice something. There's a problem with this way of categorizing behaviors. One entire category that includes most of the stuff we do each day is completely useless without the other category.

What he means by this is that it's impossible to live well if you aren't alive in the first place. You can't educate yourself about something if you aren't eating or drinking enough to stay alive. Because of this, Aristotle makes a further distinction that there is actually no need for a distinction. All of these things are ultimately aiming for the same thing: living well.

Whenever we do anything towards enacting our life plan, it can be seen as either an end in itself or a means to an end. Now from here a common question people ask is: eating is a means to the end of living well, but is living well a means to some other end?

Aristotle didn't think so. He believed no matter what your individual plan was, ultimately, your true end goal was to live well. This is the basis for why Aristotle feels so comfortable taking the position that there is an ultimate goal to life.

Even if two people fundamentally disagreed on which individual actions to take, they are still both aiming for the same thing: living well. If one person assigned the goal of his life to be the pursuit of knowledge and another person claimed his goal was to use his brain as little as possible, although it may not seem like it, Aristotle thinks that both of these people want the

same thing and will ultimately take the same path to get there.

At first glance I wanted to disagree with this. What is Aristotle talking about?

I'm on board with the idea that, despite what look like very different end goals, what we all truly want is happiness. That makes sense. But what brings me happiness and what brings the guy working at 7-Eleven happiness are two completely different things. Personally, what makes me happy is serving other people; the guys at 7-Eleven may want to own his own convenience store empire. These are two very different looking end goals!

When I first read this, I thought that Aristotle had failed to take into account the fact that different people have different needs, and it's the satisfaction of those needs that make us happy. I was wrong.

Aristotle would have agreed that what brings people happiness seems to vary largely depending on the person in question. We experience happiness when we get what we want, and no two people want the exact same things. It seems to follow from this that it is impossible to arrive at any reasonable cookie cutter approach to achieving happiness, but Aristotle thought that no matter how astronomically different our paths to happiness might be, if you distill it down enough, we all ultimately want the same things. It just appears as though different people want different things.

**“All human actions have one or more of these seven causes: chance, nature, compulsions, habit, reason, passion and desire.”**

Aristotle starts by saying that we're all individuals. It's clear that we have individual upbringings, individual perspectives, and individual exes that

drive us crazy. It's based on this encyclopedic collection of experiences that we determine what is desirable to us.

This is how we can explain the monumental chasm between the things people think will make them happy. A Buddhist monk might be happy if he could sit in isolation on the top of a mountain and contemplate his own mind. Someone else might be made just as happy if they were able to strap a pressure cooker to their chest and glorify God.

Those two desires differ from person to person, but no one would disagree that there are some desires that both the monk and the monotheistic fanatic have in common.

Both of them need 2,000 calories a day and enough shelter to get eight hours of sleep every night.

They could argue all day about some desires they have, but neither of them would argue with each other about the desirability of food or sleep.

Aristotle asks us to take a closer look at those other desires that not all humans share.

For example, you may have an intensely strong desire to eat a double bacon cheeseburger, but you don't need it. You may have an intense desire to get married to a supermodel, but you don't need it. The point that Aristotle is making is that just because we desire something doesn't mean it's actually going to help us in our quest to live well. The double bacon cheeseburger is a great example of something that seems good in one particular time and place, but in another may seem terrible.

Consider our example from before. The guy that deems his life's goal to be to use his brain as little as possible might fall into the same category. In some cases never using your brain could be great, but if he needed to memorize fifty recipes to pass his bartender's exam, he might be wishing he had used his brain a little more.

From here, Aristotle points out a very important distinction between things that we think are desirable that vary from time to time and things that we think are desirable that never vary. Another way of thinking of these are wants and needs; both are desires, but they aren't equally good in every situation.

Aristotle labels our wants as "acquired desires," or things that we desire based on our individual upbringing or collection of experiences.

He labels our needs as "natural desires," or things that are good for all humans regardless of time or setting. Natural desires are better than acquired desires because they're good for us whether we are consciously aware of it or not. The powerful thing to take from this is that in this way, although each individual person may perceive goodness differently, what is truly good for one person is truly good for all people.

The end all, be all path to living well involves a rigorous pursuit of attaining all of our natural desires. The actions along that path that fulfill our natural desires are known as "real goods" to Aristotle. But this is only the beginning of our task as humans if we want to live well; we still need a way to make sure we don't just live well for a couple days and then stray away from living well. We have to couple this knowledge that we have about our desires with a mindset of making virtuous behavior a habit, so that living well isn't even a struggle or a constant choice we're making; it becomes

second nature to us.

**“One swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.”**

It would be easy to write off all of Aristotle's analysis of the best way to live if he hadn't led by example.

It would be easy to say, “Well, that's great in theory, but what does this bookworm know about actually living life? He spends his days with his head up in the clouds thinking in abstractions.”

The only problem with that is just how unquestionably impressive the man was during his lifetime.

Despite having read half a dozen books on productivity, Aristotle makes me feel like a worthless slacker. The guy created an entire system of biological classification that went unimproved upon for almost 1500 years; he accurately assessed the organs of the body and inferred the purpose of each one; his ethics influenced the founding fathers of the United States; he created the first formal scientific method, as well as the first formal system of logic; he was the first to use a mathematical variable to account for an unknown quantity; he structured and named several of the massive fields of study whose names we still use to this day. And that's not even most of his accomplishments.

Couple that with the fact that while single-handedly revolutionizing the thought and progress of a species, he also found time to be the most authoritative and comprehensive source we have of the history of the Pre-socratics. In fact, pretty much all of the facts that have been presented in this

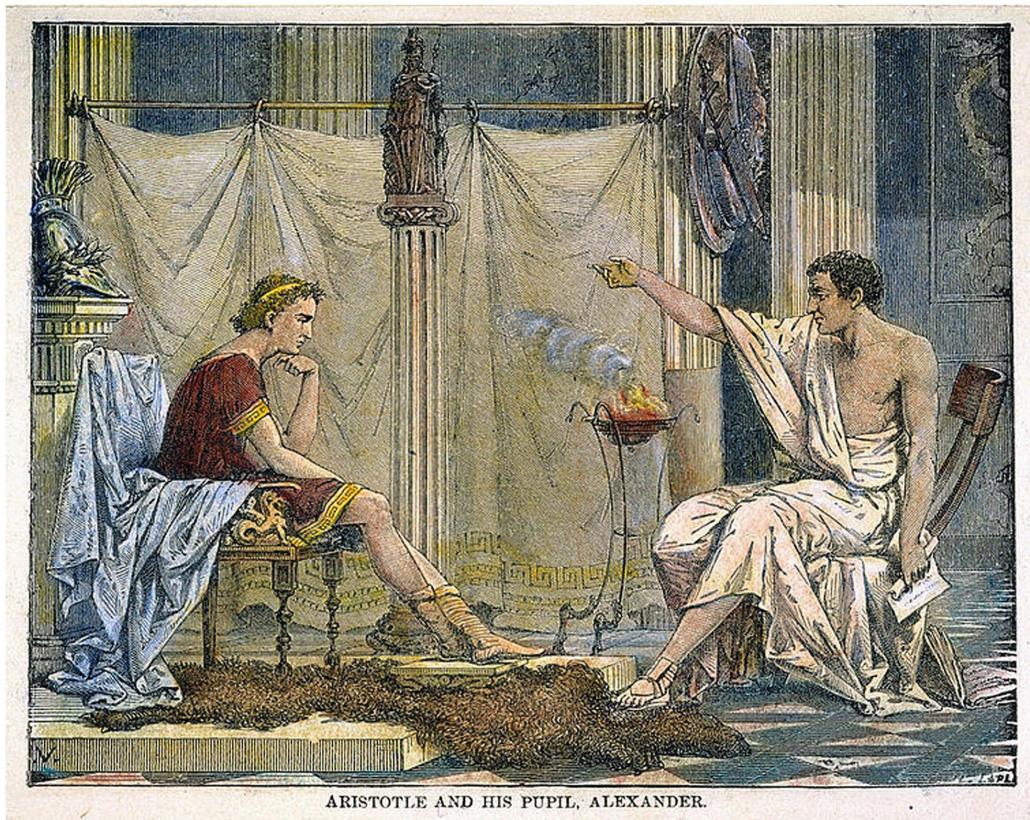
book so far are derived from the history of the Pre-socratics written by Aristotle. So basically, aside from the sporadic terrible joke or horrible metaphor, Aristotle wrote this book. Please forward your complaints to him.

If this still doesn't impress you, consider the fact that all of these breakthroughs he facilitated are just the ones we know about from the works that happened to not be lost throughout the centuries. This fraction of his original work totals up to about 1.5 million words, or in other words, about the length of all seven Harry Potter books combined with all three books in the Fifty Shades of Grey franchise. It's not surprising that such a prolific thinker had plenty of people tugging on his toga trying to learn from him. By far, the most notable and historically significant of these students was Alexander the Great.

**“The truly good and wise man will bear all kinds of fortune in a seemly way, and will always act in the noblest manner that the circumstances allow.”**

Alexander the Great needs no explanation, but his relationship to Aristotle is not in the same boat. The fact that Alexander was a student of Aristotle is one of those pieces of trivia that everyone knows—if it came up on Jeopardy, you'd sit there in silence after answering it correctly so that the people around you would think that knowing stuff is no big deal to you. We all know the process.

But after knowing this piece of trivia, what I've found is that most people assume that if Alexander was a student of Aristotle, then his behavior as a ruler and desire for world conquest must have been something that Aristotle actively shaped. This is far from the case.



ARISTOTLE AND HIS PUPIL, ALEXANDER.

**Painted depiction of Alexander the Great being taught by Aristotle. Don't mind the blatant violation of the fire code in the background next to the highly flammable curtains.**

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Plutarch was a Roman historian who famously described the curriculum Aristotle directed at Alexander. It was a strict regimen of ethics, politics, medicine, natural philosophy, poetry—but no matter how brilliant of a teacher Aristotle was, there was one major problem. Alexander the Great was thirteen years old at the time. How much would you have learned from Aristotle when you were thirteen years old?

I can't even remember being thirteen years old, let alone learning anything noteworthy. Also, how much reverence do you think Alexander the Great had for the benefits of things like ethics or medicine when he was handed the most powerful army in the world and was born into royalty in Macedonia?

Maybe the more important thing to think about is not how Aristotle helped Alexander, but how Alexander helped Aristotle. After their time together ended, everyone knows what happened next: Aristotle returned to Athens, and Alexander began conquering the known world.

But whenever Alexander would conquer a city, he would keep Aristotle in mind; he would make sure that samples of the biology of the local area were sent to Aristotle so that he could continue his work on classifying things in nature. Now that I think of it, I can't imagine many ways having Alexander the Great in your rolodex would be a bad thing for you. Well, until Aristotle was exiled for having Macedonian sympathies, but what can you do about that?

If you want to understand the great philosophers of antiquity and how they relate to each other, a decent place to start is to look at a famous painting called The School of Athens by the great artist Raphael. At first glance it

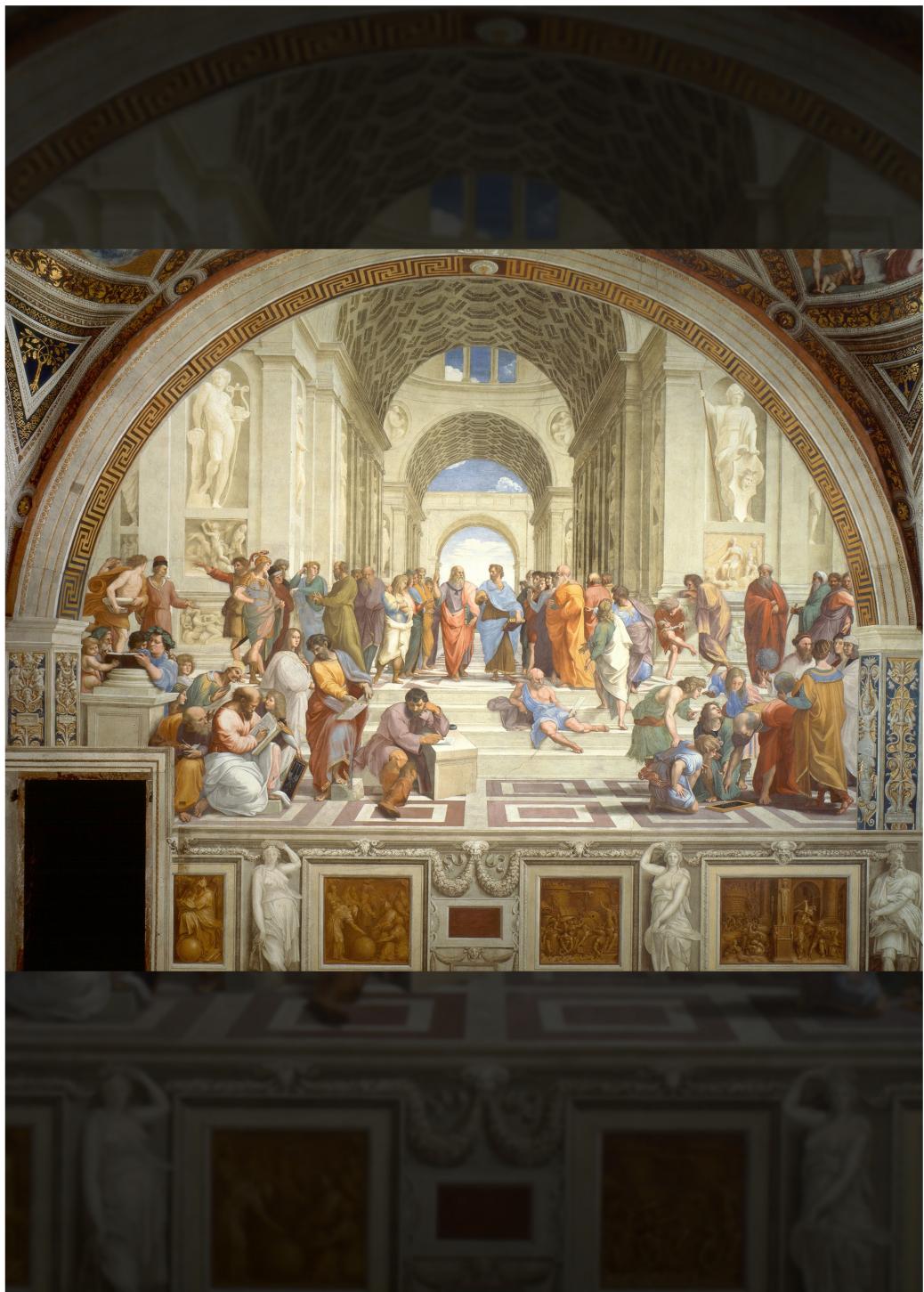
looks like a bunch of shifty individuals all talking to each other on the steps leading up to a building, but a closer examination proves otherwise. Every person depicted in the painting represents some philosopher from early antiquity, and in the center of the painting are two men who the artist seems to be purposefully separating from the rest of them.

These two men in the middle of the painting are Plato and Aristotle. Again, to the untrained eye just looking at these two guys, you might think that they were just in the middle of a heated conversation, flailing their arms around. But in reality, their hand placement represents the fundamental disagreement that the two thinkers held, and one of the most fundamental disagreements in the history of philosophy.

Plato is the older guy on the left with his index finger pointing to the sky like he just yelled, “Eureka!” or something. Aristotle is the taller man on the right with his palm face down in front of him as though he is proving to Plato that he isn’t nervous.

The artist Raphael did all of this purposefully. Plato is pointing towards the sky because he is a rationalist. He believes that truth about the world around us is arrived at through reason, or in his case specifically that the true forms of things exist in the mental world of the essences of things—his world of forms.

Aristotle is holding his hand out to represent that he is an empiricist. He believes truth is arrived at through sense experience, or in his case specifically by observing things in the natural world around us, hence his hand directing our attention to what is immediately around them.



**The glorious and famous painting by Raphael: The School of Athens.  
Nearly every notable philosopher up to his modern date is  
hidden in the picture somewhere.**

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**“It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs.”**

Knowing their individual fields of expertise, we could expect this dichotomy. Plato was a hardcore mathematician. So much so that he actually hung a sign over the entrance to The Academy that said, “Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here.” Plato had phases throughout his life and philosophy where he was heavily influenced by the Pythagoreans, and the idea of numbers and mathematics being a potential path to truth in the universe is something that never left him.

We can imagine the thoughts he was having that were fueling his rationalism. After all, we can think of things that we can never perceive with our senses. For example, we can think about a perfect triangle or a perfect sphere, but do either of those things have any basis in the natural world?

Plato believed that if we used reason to arrive in our minds at the perfect triangle, then that triangle is more real or “true” than any relegated form of a triangle we can find made out of these shadows on the cave wall that we know as the physical world.

On the other hand, Aristotle was an empiricist and a biologist. Just at the most basic level, being a biologist is much different than being a mathematician.

Mathematicians deal with abstract concepts. Biologists deal with what is measurable and observable.

When you look at an animal and do to it all the different things biologists do, there is one important requisite to whatever task you're doing: you're looking at it. You are using your eyes. On the other hand, math isn't done with our eyes and ears. Yes, I personally perform math problems by counting things up on my fingers and toes, but someone as adept as Plato would be doing things in his head. Again, it's easy to see, given their different fields of expertise, how Aristotle would have valued sense experience and Plato would have valued reason.

You may be saying to yourself right now, "Will this guy just shut up about Plato already? I just read an entire chapter on the guy, and now I have to hear more? Let's hear about Aristotle!"

Bonnie and Clyde, Simon and Garfunkel—there are just dynamic duos in this world. Two people who worked together so closely, were around each other for so long, and affected each other's work so drastically that their existences are almost intrinsically connected by history. It would be very difficult to have a conversation about Bonnie for very long without bringing up something about Clyde. It would be almost impossible to talk about Art Garfunkel without bringing up some relationship to something that he did with Paul Simon. Plato and Aristotle are one of these dynamic duos from history.

Aristotle was Plato's star student. Much of the development of Plato's philosophy probably can be attributed to arguments and discussions that he had with Aristotle over the years. Both of them were trying to find answers to the same philosophical problems, and because their answers were so diametrically opposed, individually brilliant, and so close together in the time they took place, these two have an inexorable relationship. As someone dedicated to bringing these ideas the justice they deserve, many of

Aristotle's ideas just need to be addressed as responses to Plato's theories. To do it any other way would be dishonest.

Now, there are few issues that these two debated more heavily than tree-y-ness. In case you've blacked out that section of the Plato chapter as a post-traumatic stress response to how terribly I explained it, there are few questions these two discussed more than the question of, "Why is it that we live in a world where no two trees look the same and no two rocks look the same, but for some reason we never have a problem recognizing that something is a tree or that something is a rock? What is that underlying tree-y-ness that we see, that essence of what makes it a tree that allows us to instantly distinguish a tree from a bush or a fern or any other type of plant?"

Real quick reset on the rationalist approach: Plato solved this problem with his famous doctrine of innate knowledge. We are born with full knowledge of everything in the world of forms; learning is just a process of remembering it little by little. This answers the question of why we somehow know that something is a tree, despite the fact that they look entirely dissimilar. We are born with an innate idea of "tree-y-ness," and it's that innate idea that we are connecting to when we see a tree.

**"All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer sight to almost everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things."**

Aristotle didn't agree. Aristotle recognized and agreed that there was some

concept of “tree-y-ness” that we are somehow interacting with when we see a tree, but he didn’t think we necessarily needed to be born with knowledge of this heavenly realm to be able recognize tree-y-ness. In fact, to Aristotle it wasn’t magical at all.

Aristotle thought our concept of “tree-y-ness” simply came from all the experiences with trees that we gathered through our senses. What we think of as “tree-y-ness” is really just the sum total of all our experiences with trees up until this point in our life. Aristotle believed that when you’re growing up, whenever you see a tree, at some level you compare that tree with all the other trees you’ve seen up until that point in your life. You see similarities between them. You make connections between different sensory experiences you’ve had with trees throughout your life.

Aristotle doesn’t think all these trees you’ve seen are imperfect copies of some ideal form of a tree up in the sky. He thinks that “tree-y-ness” is found in each and every tree that we see because the similarities between all those trees, even if they’re concepts and not tangible things, are still found in every example of a tree. It may not be immediately apparent what qualities we’re connecting to that allow us to know what we’re seeing is a tree, but just like Aristotle’s process of biological classification, by examining the thing closely to identify what it actually is, we can find this more eternal concept of the essence of that thing under the surface.



The focal point of The School of Athens was Plato (left) and Aristotle (right). Plato's hand pointing to the sky, a nod to his rationalism that the true forms of things exist in an ideal World of Forms. Aristotle's hand more grounded, a nod to his empirical approach to knowledge.

So Plato and Aristotle agreed that there were eternal and universal properties among all these various examples of things in the natural world; the difference was how they arrived at that knowledge. And it was a pretty big difference. Think of the courage and ingenuity it must have taken to go against your teacher, and of all teachers: Plato! It's hard for us to put ourselves in the shoes of just how much Plato meant to Aristotle even from when he was a young child. He had heard stories about Plato. He dreamed of being educated by him long before he ever met the guy. Aristotle came to Athens after his father died when he was seventeen with the sole intention of realizing his dream of being educated in Plato's academy. Just imagine meeting your idol, becoming his star pupil, and then being so brilliant and such an innovative thinker that you actually begin to develop an entirely new system that arguably transcends Plato's in terms of longevity. It must have been mind-numbing.

Aristotle had studied at The Academy for around twenty years when Plato died, so it must have felt like a dagger in the heart when The Academy didn't choose Aristotle as the successor to the school. It made no sense! Aristotle was Plato's flagship student! Who could possibly be more deserving of the post?

Well, Plato's nephew of course! And it's no coincidence that his nephew's opinions about philosophy closely resembled Plato's. Makes you want to sigh, right?

I guess you could look at it two ways: you can be miserable like me and think of it as nepotism or blatant corruption, or you can think of it as The Academy's way of carrying on the legacy of the founder of the school and one of the greatest philosophers ever at the time. Either way, Aristotle decided to take his business elsewhere at this point in his life.

But there's a silver lining to every unjust appointment of a successor! What must have felt like rejection or even betrayal at the time, quickly turned into one of the best things that ever happened to Aristotle. He took a trip. He knew he disagreed with Plato on a lot of fundamental things, so my guess is he traveled around exploring his ideas, perhaps in search of some clarity as to why they differed so much.

Along this journey he collected samples of plants and animals and began analyzing them, noticing ways they could be categorized and distinguished from each other into an organized list. But don't mischaracterize what Aristotle was doing here. This guy wasn't a hobbyist. This wasn't Aristotle's own personal scrapbook he was going to show his grandkids someday; this was beautiful! A friend of mine once said, "Well, it was still a scrapbook! Just not a hobbyist scrapbook!" Fine, then it was the most influential scrapbook in the history of the world: his system of the biological classification of everything in nature.

At the most basic level, Aristotle divides things down into two categories: Living and Non-living.

I'm with you so far, Mr. Aristotle. That must have been a very difficult distinction for you to make. Just kidding, this is a necessary starting point.

The next step in his method of categorizing plants and animals involves identifying the physical characteristics of each plant or animal and placing similar ones in categories with each other. The more we dissect a particular animal, we not only learn about its relationship to all the other animals, but we also hone our ability to identify the essence of what makes something what it is. Its individual "tree-y-ness," if you will (obviously for a squirrel it

would be “squirrel-y-ness”).

But for Aristotle, classifying all these animals went way beyond just looking at physical characteristics like whether it had wings or a tail. This was actually a huge innovation at the time. The Pre-socratics had tried to organize plants and animals before, but they had never got very far. Aristotle thought this was because they only looked at what the thing was made out of and then never really made much progress after that. Thales said everything is made of water. Democritus said that everything is an intricate collection of atoms. We can see where Aristotle is coming from—what real progress was ever made by classifying things in these ways?

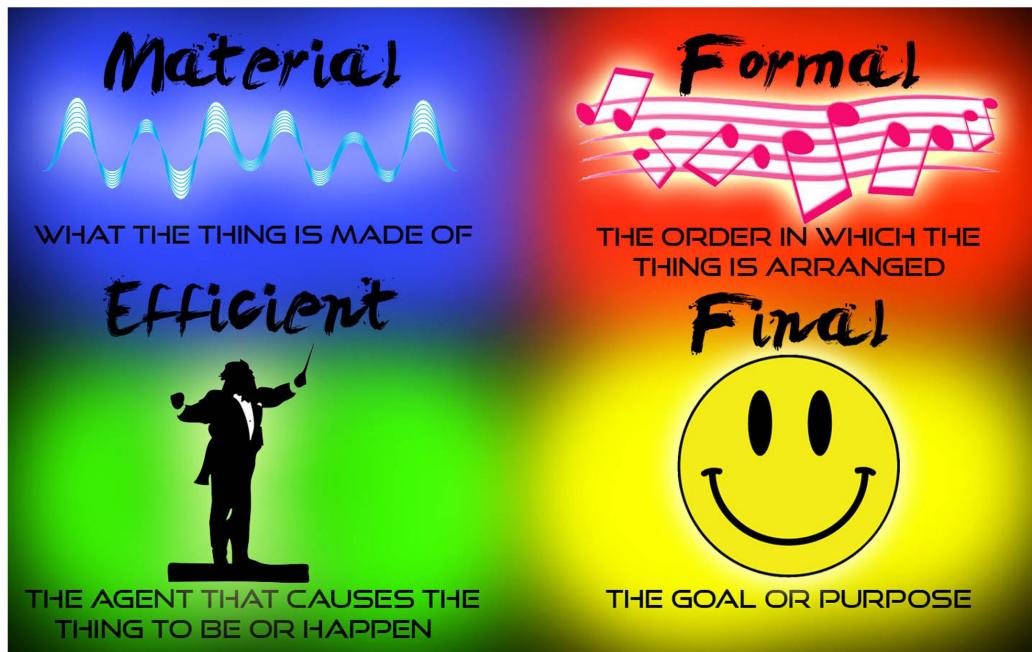
Aristotle definitely thought it was a noble pursuit to ask what something was made out of, but he thought, “Why does it have to stop there?” That was only the beginning of what makes something what it is. Or to put it in his words, what something is made of is only one of four different causes that all things possess that explain their existence.

### **“Nature does nothing uselessly.”**

The first cause is the one that we just talked about: the material cause. This is the one that the Pre-socratics were largely obsessed with, and it concerns itself with what the thing is made of. In modern times, we would look at something like water and conclude that the material cause of it is two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. If we were looking at a bridge, we would say that the material cause of the bridge is metal, concrete, wood, etc.

The second cause is what Aristotle called the formal cause. This one concerns itself with what the form of a thing is or what the structure or arrangement of something is. In keeping with our example from before, the

form of a bridge is whatever arrangement of these raw materials the architect deemed worthy at the time he was building the bridge.



In modern times when we think of cause we usually only think of the final cause, but Aristotle thought any one thing had four things that account for its existence. Why we no longer look at the other three is a subject for another book.

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The third cause is the efficient cause, or how the thing is brought into being or what made the thing transform into what it currently is. The efficient cause of the bridge would be the construction crew that put the bridge together.

The final cause is the purpose that the thing serves. The final cause of the bridge is to allow people, cars, and trucks to safely traverse a dangerous chasm, or for trolls and homeless people to live underneath.

If the Pre-socratics spent way too much time focusing on the material cause of something, then Aristotle thought Plato and his influencers the Pythagoreans spent way too much time focusing on the formal cause, or what the form or arrangement of the thing was—hence the famous “world of forms”.

Aristotle thought both of these were extremely important when looking at anything that exists, but he thought it wasn’t the whole story. Aristotle thought using his four causes was a much more comprehensive and accurate way to understand things.

The study of looking at things in nature and dissecting them to eventually find the purpose they serve is called Teleology. And to Aristotle, there wasn’t a creature or a feature of a creature that was too small or seemingly insignificant to dissect and try to find the purpose nature assigned for it. Does this remind you of his ethics? From the way you brush your teeth to the way you do your finances, there is no facet of your life too small or insignificant to warrant examination.

As an early biologist, it must have been tempting to gloss over the creatures

that weren't very exciting. I can relate to this from being in the public school system. Who wants to study an earthworm when you have so many other complex and much more interesting things to examine—giraffes or lions or even other human beings?

Aristotle didn't think this way. He thought each creature, no matter how small or simple, was a unique piece of this obvious system of order that we are immersed in, and that every cog in that machine could teach us something new and beautiful. He warns future philosophers and biologists to not lose sight of the ultimate goal:

**“We therefore must not recoil with childish aversion from the examination of the humbler animals. Every realm of nature is marvelous: and as Heraclitus, when the strangers who came to visit him found him warming himself at the furnace in the kitchen and hesitated to go in, is reported to have bidden them not to be afraid to enter, as even in that kitchen divinities were present.....so we should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste: for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful. Absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end are to be found in Nature’s works in the highest degree, and the resultant end of her generations and combinations is a form of the beautiful.”**

Let's examine what he's saying here a bit more. This "absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end" is Aristotle referring to the final cause of a thing. The final cause of something is vastly important beyond just being able to classify it, because it's only by knowing the function or purpose something serves that we can determine how good or bad it is.

For example, we have ears. The purpose of an ear is to hear things. So an ear

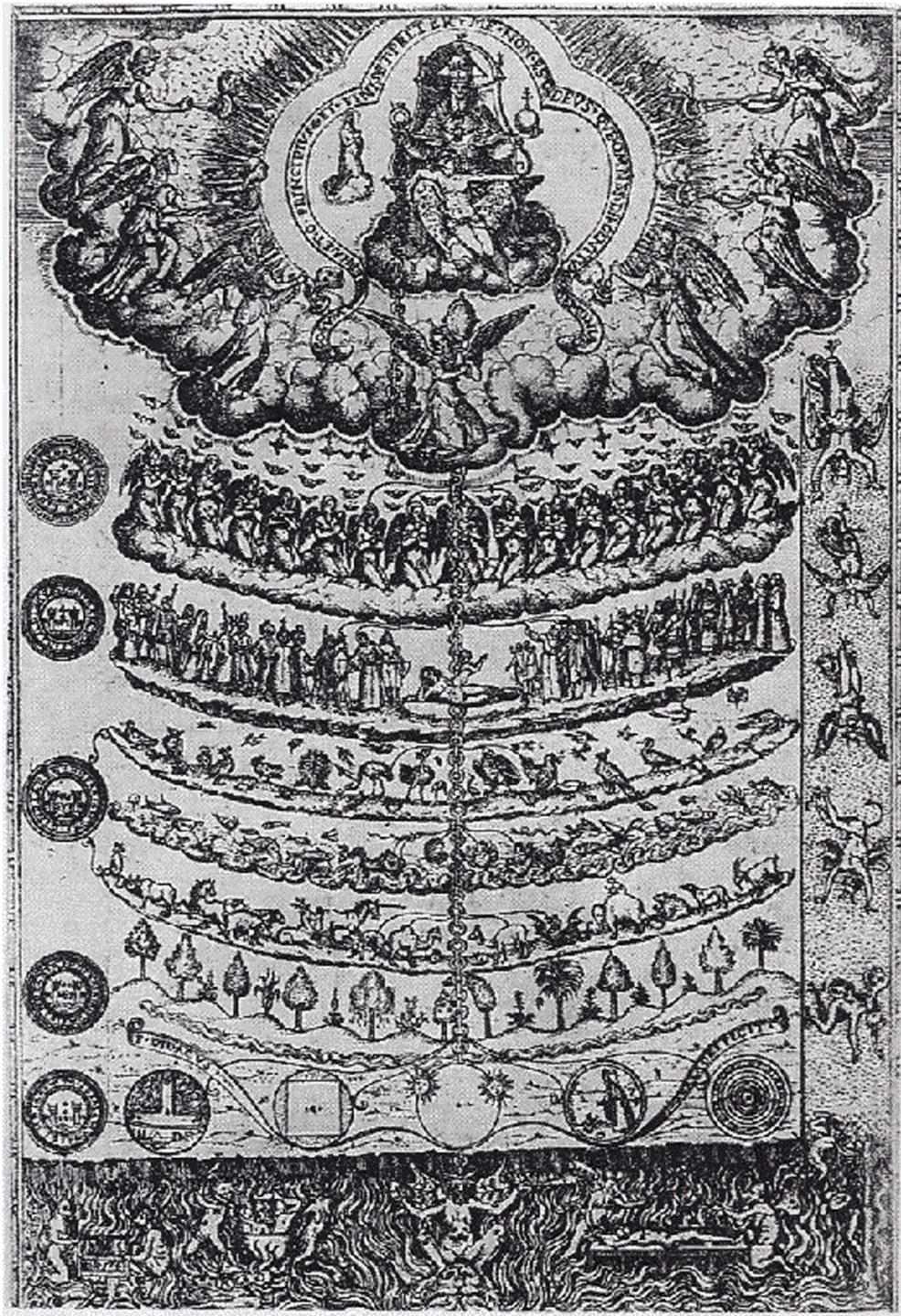
that hears things well is a good ear. This examination can be applied to all things no matter how basic or complex—from a single skin cell to the way humans live their lives.

There's a common siren song that we've all heard many times throughout our lives that runs contrary to this idea by Aristotle. We've all heard someone say that there is no way you can ever judge anything. You can never say someone's haircut was bad, just different. You can never say someone's car is bad, just different than your car.

You can't be too mad at the person who comes to the defense of these people with terrible haircuts and cars that can't make it to the end of their cul-de-sac, but to say that no car is better than any other car is to infer the motivations of the person that they're talking about, which I think is dishonest.

Yes, cosmically speaking, there is no haircut that is better or worse than any other haircut. There is no car that is inherently better or worse than any other car. But if the reason you bought your car is to have a reliable means of transportation so you can get to work everyday at 9am and keep your job, then when your car breaks down at 8:45am ten miles away from your office building, your car is in that sense a “bad” car.

What Aristotle is pointing out when it comes to things in nature is an important distinction to make in all aspects of life. Nothing is good or bad until there is an end goal that we've assigned to it. To say that no action or thing is good or bad is to pretend to know the reasons behind why the person did the thing they did.



**Artist's depiction of the Great Chain of Being. Although Aristotle wasn't the only one who developed the idea, his work of classification definitely gave others a nudge in the direction.**

Now obviously there are exceptions to this when it comes to elements in nature. After all, who are we to determine what the function or purpose of something in nature is? But this wasn't a given back in the time of the ancient Greeks. They saw themselves living in a harmonious, ordered cosmos that we can make sense of. If this was the way you saw the universe, why shouldn't you be able to find out what the purpose of something is within this organized framework?

Not only that, but the distinction that Aristotle makes is highly useful to us individually. If you want to know whether you're doing something right or wrong, the first step is to establish an end goal that you're striving towards; a plan. When observing things in nature, we should ask ourselves: what is the "end goal" of this thing?

The synergy between his ethics is obvious. The same idea of using observation to determine whether a life was lived well can be applied to judging what a good ear is, or a good tree, or anything for that matter. Aristotle thought it was impossible to classify something accurately if you didn't at least know what the parts of it were doing or what purpose they served, and this is why final causes were so important to him.

Now that Aristotle has laid out the proper way to dissect the properties of something that explain its existence, he's ready to start actually making observations in the natural world and finding out how these creatures all relate to each other. Once Aristotle started engaging in this process day after day, he started noticing patterns, particularly in the way that we think about deducing that things are true or false.

For example, let's say we're trying to classify an unknown reptile. One of

the many observations that Aristotle was making may have been: if all snakes are carnivorous reptiles that don't have legs, and we just found a carnivorous reptile that has legs, then no matter what, this reptile we are observing cannot be a snake.

Another example would be: if all birds have wings, and this animal we just found doesn't have wings, then this animal can't be a bird.

As you can imagine, as he was classifying the animals, he must have found himself repeating these sorts of logical deductions over and over again. I can't imagine how Aristotle must have felt when he started to realize this—that there seems to be some measurable, mathematical syntax to thinking about things that are true. The flurry of thoughts and emotions must have been crazy for him! This world is unfathomably complex—or is it? Aristotle must have felt like he was on to something. Nature seemed unfathomably complex before he began this arduous process of classifying things; maybe he could find the same sort of ordering principles in thought itself!

He called these logical deductions that he found “syllogisms.” Here's how Aristotle explained it in his work we call “Prior Analytics” from *The Organon*:

**“A syllogism is discourse in which, certain things being stated, something other than what is stated follows of necessity from their being so.**

**I mean by the last phrase that they produce the consequence, and by this, that no further term is required from without in order to make the consequence necessary.**

**I call that a perfect syllogism which needs nothing other than what has been stated to make plain what necessarily follows; a syllogism is imperfect, if it needs either one or more propositions, which are indeed the necessary consequences of the terms set down, but have not been expressly stated as premisses.”**

I'm not going to try to reinvent the wheel in this one case. In practically every philosophy textbook where they're explaining the concept of a syllogism, they use the same example, and I personally think it's a great one:

All men are mortal.

Socrates is a man.

Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

That is as clear cut of a syllogism as you're ever going to get.

Something is said: All men are mortal

Something else related is said: Socrates is a man

A logical deduction is made: Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Here's yet another fact for trivia night: almost everyone attributes the syllogism to Aristotle, but he actually never used this example in any of his works on logic.

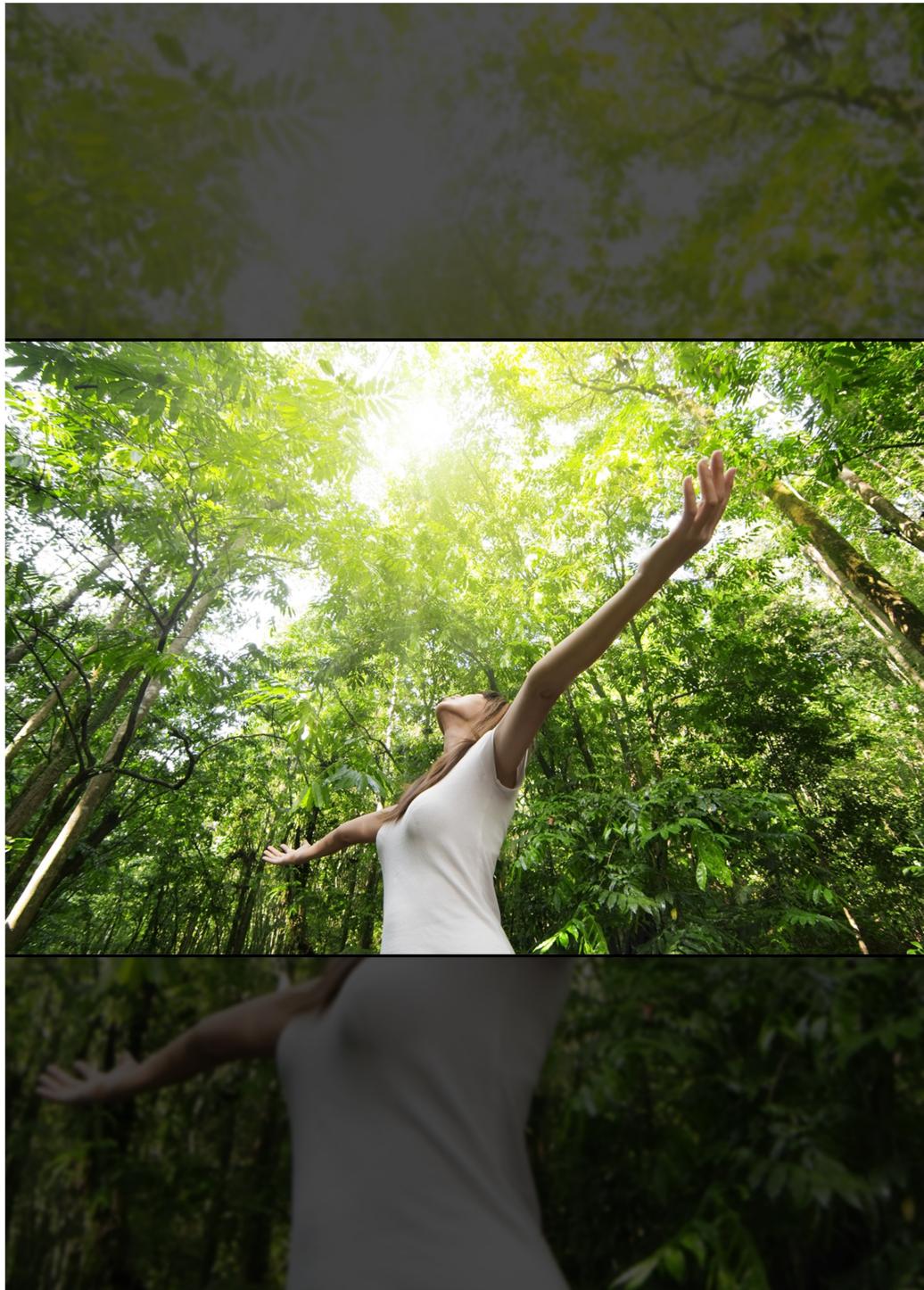
Aristotle preferred to use variables to explain his syllogisms because he

didn't want people to get hung up on the individual examples he was using. It really is a stroke of genius if you think about it: when you use variables, it shines light on the fact that no matter what these variables stand for, this logical declaration has to be true. This deduction that is being made is not contingent on some individual situation or semantic trick the guy is using.

\*cough\* The Sophists \*cough\*

But to Aristotle, we shouldn't get lost in the minutiae. We need to understand the greater context of his system of logic. It's not a way for him to egotistically validate his system of biological classification. It's not a way for him to validate his ethics. His system of logic stands on its own, and he saw its greater use as a tool or an instrument you should use to arrive at deductive truth.

He believed this so much he titled his famous work describing this system of logic *The Organon*, which means “the tool” or “the instrument.”



Aristotle believed that our conception of what makes a tree a tree comes all of our collective experiences with trees up until that point. Go on more nature walks, people.

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