**Socrates**

During the golden age of freedom and education in Athens, many teachers traveled around Greece educating the young. One of the most famous of these teachers was a man named Socrates.

Many of the teachers of his day taught that a man should consider the consequences of his actions before making a decision. Socrates taught that the consequences did not matter. What was most important was that you always did what was right. He believed that if something was right, it did not matter what would happen to you, you should do it.

Socrates also taught his students to think for themselves. He created a teaching method known today as the Socratic Method, which helped students think clearly, and question their currently accepted way of thinking.

Socrates was eventually accused of corrupting the young. After being convicted by a jury he was sentenced to death.

“As for me, all I know is that I know nothing.”

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 Socrates spent a great part of his life thinking, discussing, and persuading others that they also knew very little. It annoyed a great number of people.

Born in 469 B.C.E. to Greek parents, his sculptor father and midwife mother, he served as a soldier in the Peloponnesian War, and later worked as a stonemason, although apparently not very hard and for not very long. He seemed to have enough money to support himself, his wife, and three sons, and was able to spend his days in the Athenian marketplace discussing difficult questions.

His conversations might begin with “What is the right thing to do?” or “What is wisdom?” He pretended that he didn’t have the answers to any question. Anyone who had the time or curiosity to sit and talk with him would become involved in a fascinating conversation about how to search for the truth by examining the answers they gave to his questions. Socrates would try to teach them to think more clearly and not be easily satisfied with what they thought they knew. His way of investigating issues required a student to answer the original question. Socrates would then suggest possible outcomes based on the student’s answer, and the student would discover the truth by way of careful reasoning. This way of teaching through discussion became known as the Socratic method.

He believed that happiness is the ultimate goal for every human and that any action taken by a person is taken in the belief that it will bring happiness to that person. If the person is very knowledgeable and can think clearly about the possible results of any decision, he or she has a better chance of making choices that would lead to happiness.

Socrates chose not to take any money from his students. This may have made Socrates happier, but his decision made his wife, Xanthippe, cross. We don’t know what she thought when polygamy (being married to more than one person at the same time) was legalized in 415 B.C.E. and Socrates apparently took a second wife.

Many people, especially young people, became loyal followers. One was Plato, who became another famous philosopher. He wrote down some of Socrates’ ideas, which is why we know about him, as Socrates himself wrote nothing down. Unfortunately, other people thought he was against democracy, that he was corrupting the young people, and that he disrespected the gods. In 399 B.C.E. he was brought to trial, found guilty, and sentenced to death.

When friends tried to encourage him to escape, he remained true to his own teachings and calmly thought about whether escape would be the right thing to do. Eventually he decided that even an innocent person must obey the laws of the state. So he took and drank a cup of poison hemlock, which killed him.

**Plato**

A young student of Socrates by the name of Plato began teaching upon the death of Socrates. At the age of 30, Plato opened a school that would remain in operation for nearly nine centuries following his death.

Plato authored a book which he titled "The Republic," which outlined what he believed was the perfect government. Plato felt that a democracy was not the most effective form of government, because the lower classes of people could not be trusted. He felt that the higher classes, which were more educated, ought to be in charge of the government.

“How can you prove whether at this moment we are sleeping, and all our thoughts are a dream; or whether we are awake, and talking to one another in the waking state?”

“Good actions give strength to ourselves and inspire good actions in others.”                                                    - Plato

Plato was born in Athens in 429 B.C.E. to wealthy and aristocratic parents. His real name is thought to have been Aristocles, after his grandfather. The name Plato comes from Platus, Greek for wide or broad. We don’t know whether Plato got his ‘broad’ name from his figure, forehead, or style of teaching.

As a young man Plato spent a great deal of time listening to and talking with Socrates. When Socrates died Plato wrote down as much of his teachings and ideas as he could, which is why we know as much as we do about Socrates.

Plato was an experienced soldier and politician, but he left Athenian politics after Socrates was executed. He travelled through Italy, Sicily, and Egypt. While in Italy he learnt about Pythagoras and became convinced that mathematics provided the best training for the mind.

Around 387 B.C.E. he returned to Athens. He founded the Academy and taught there until he died in 347 B.C.E. The Academy lasted for 900 years, longer than any other known school. Plato believed that an ideal education consisted of 10 years learning arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics, followed by 5 years learning dialectics--the art of question and answer.

One of Plato’s most well known stories comes from The Republic, one of the 30 books he wrote. In it he explains that people are comfortable not knowing the truth because they don’t know any different. If a person starts to learn the truth he may become scared and want to return to being ignorant. But as he keeps looking, the truth becomes less frightening and he is no longer happy to stay ignorant.

Plato uses The Allegory of the Cave to illustrate this. He suggests that there are people who have always been kept prisoner in a cave, chained so that they can only see the back of the cave. Behind them, outside the cave, people and animals pass by. A fire in the cave throws their shadows onto the back wall, so the shadows are the only things the prisoners can see. The prisoners naturally believe that the shadows are real.

If one prisoner is freed and turns around she will at first be blinded by the glare from outside the cave, and frightened and confused to discover that everything she had believed was not, in fact, the truth. She might want to run back to the safety of the cave, but with time she would learn the truth and would want to help others learn it, too.

Plato’s books are called dialogues. These were written in the form of conversations that students would have to study and discuss in order to uncover the true meaning of the world. In them he wrote about dance, music, drama, architecture, religion, politics, mathematics, and more.

**Aristotle**

After studying with Plato for nearly 20 years, Aristotle set out on his own as a teacher. He opened a school in Athens where he taught on everything from science, to politics, to critical thinking.

Aristotle wrote over 200 books during his life. These books would remain long after his death, and would affect Western thinking for centuries to come.

“Education is the best provision for old age.”

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Some people say that Aristotle was the greatest philosopher of all. He was certainly one of Plato’s best students. He spent twenty years at Plato’s Academy, first as a student, then a researcher, and finally a teacher.

Aristotle was born in 384 B.C.E., in Stageira, Chalcidice. His father, Nichomachus, was a doctor for the king of Macedonia, who was the grandfather of Alexander the Great. It is likely that Aristotle was a friend of the king’s son, Philip.

Nichomachus died when Aristotle was about 10 and as his mother had also died, Proxenus, who was either an uncle or a family friend, cared for Aristotle.

When Aristotle was about 17 he was sent to Athens to study. Plato soon recognized his brilliance and referred to him as the “Intellect of the School”. He only left the Academy when Plato died in 347 B.C.E.

While in Assos, where he might have been an ambassador for Philip (now the king of Macedonia), he married Pythias, the sister of Hermias, one of his student friends and ruler of Assos. They had a daughter. When Pythias died about 10 years later he formed a relationship with Herpyllis, who came from his hometown. They had a son, Nichomachus.

After Aristotle had spent three years in Assos King Philip invited him to Macedonia, where he became Alexander’s teacher for the next 12 years. With a teacher like that, no wonder Alexander became known as “Great”! When Philip died, Alexander set off on his expedition into Asia, and Aristotle went back to Athens. Here he opened his own school, the Lyceum. For another 12 years he taught at his school and people think that this is when he wrote his most important notes and books.

Alexander brought back samples of vegetable and animal life from the conquered lands and gave these to Aristotle. He also gave the Lyceum a huge amount of money, worth about four million dollars today. Aristotle used this money to build the world’s first zoo and botanical garden, and what was learned there became the basis of the world’s scientific knowledge about natural science. He developed a way of classifying animals that is still used today.

In the mornings Aristotle would walk around the grounds of the Lyceum with his students. He ate lunch with them, and in the afternoons he would give lectures to the public. The students at the Lyceum ruled themselves, with a different student being elected every 10 days to handle the running of the school. Each student was also responsible for doing historical or scientific research.

When Alexander the Great died, the Athenian enemies of the Macedonians became powerful. They accused Aristotle of being disrespectful to the gods. Aristotle knew that Socrates had been accused of the same thing and sentenced to death, so he escaped from Athens and went to Chalcis, where he died the same year, 323 B.C.E. He was 61.

Aristotle is famous for writing about all aspects of the world. He wrote about poetry, ethics (standards of behavior), logic, rhetoric (the art of using language), weather, and more. In fact, he studied and wrote about every part of science that was then known and he is still considered one of the greatest thinkers of all time.