

## THE GREEK TRIO

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### Abstract

This paper deals with the characters of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The cultures and civilizations of the west have been based on the ideas and philosophy of these three Greek philosophers which are called "The Trio."

Socrates was a social reformer. He denounced and rejected all kinds of corruption. He sacrificed his life in order to replace vice by virtue. Plato hated poets because he thought they were liars or imitators; when they describe something they are far away from the truth one degree. He says that good poetry should be didactic. As for Aristotle, he is famous for "catharsis" which means a patient should be treated with the same disease which he suffers from. He also says that in order to make people avoid committing crimes they should be purged. Purgation is done by showing the audiences acts which make them afraid of the punishment and feel pity for the victim.

### المستخلص :

تتناول هذه الورقة وصفا لثلاثة فلاسفة يونانيين وهم سقراط الحكيم وافلاطون واوروسطو ويمكن القول بان فلسفتهم وافكارهم النيرة وحكمتهم التي اشتهروا بها هي اساس الحضارات الغربية في مختلف العصور . فلنأخذ مثلا سقراط الذي لقب بالحكيم نظرا لحكمته العظيمة . كان هذا الفيلسوف يحارب الفساد بمختلف اشكاله وكان يسعى لتعليم تلاميذه الاخلاق الحميدة ومحاربة البرذيلة والفساد . اما افلاطون كان هو الآخر يحارب الفساد كما كان يحارب الشعراء لانهم حسب اعتقاده كذابون ومقلدون ولا يتناولون الحقيقة في اشعارهم بل كانوا يبالغون وبذلك هم يبتعدون عن الحقيقة وكان يفضل الشعر التعليمي على غيره من الاشعار الذي من خلاله يتم توعية القراء وتهذيبهم بما يتناسب مع الاخلاق الحميدة . اما ارسطو فكان هو الآخر فيلسوفا حكيما وقد اشتهر بالعبارة " وداوني بالتالي كانت هي الداء " .

## **Introduction**

The word 'Trio', in Latin, means three, three people. These three people are Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. They were highly distinguished philosophers. During their time Greek Civilization became at its highest level in knowledge, philosophy and science. In fact they laid the foundations of Western culture. As Cicero said, Socrates "brought down philosophy from heaven to earth", i.e. from the nature speculation of the Ionian and Italian cosmologists to analyses of the character and conduct to human life, which he assessed in terms of an original theory of the soul. Living during the chaos of the Peloponnesian War, with its erosion of moral values, Socrates felt called to shore up the ethical dimensions of life by the admonition to "know thyself" and by the effort to explore the connotations of moral and humanistic terms.

Building on the life and thought of Socrates, Plato developed a profound and wide ranging system of philosophy. His thought has logical, epistemological, and myth, and it is occasionally mystical in tone; but fundamentally Plato is a rationalist, devoted to the proposition that reason must be followed wherever it leads. Thus the core of Plato's philosophy, resting upon a foundation of eternal Ideals, or Forms, is a rationalistic ethics.

More than any other thinker, Aristotle determined the orientation and the content of Western intellectual history. He was the author of a philosophical and scientific system that through the centuries became the support and vehicle for both medieval Christian and Islamic scholastic thought: until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Western culture was Aristotelian. Even after the intellectual revolutions of centuries to

follow Aristotelian concepts and ideas remained embedded in Western thinking.

### Chapter One

#### Socrates, 470 BC – 399 BC.

Socrates was born almost 10 years after the Battle of Salamis. His father, Sophroniscus, was a friend of the family of Aristides the Just, founder of the Delian League, from which the empire arose. The tale that his father was a sculptor rests on Plato's reference to the mythical sculptor Daedalus as the ancestor, or work lineage, of Socrates. Although the philosopher's mother, Phaenarete, acted as a "midwife," this fact implies nothing about her social status.

Socrates' record for endurance was distinguished. He served as a hoplite, perhaps at Samos (440), and at several stations during the Peloponnesian War. (At Potidaea he saved the life of Alcibiades.) In politics he took no part, knowing, as he told his judges, that office would mean compromise with his principles. Once at least, in 406-404, he was a member of the Boule, or legislative council, of 500; and, at the trial of the victors of Arginusae, he resisted – at first with the support of his colleagues, afterward alone – the unconstitutional condemnation of the generals by a collective verdict. He showed the same courage in 404, when the oligarchy of the Thirty Tyrants in Athens, wishing to implicate honorable men in their proceedings, instructed him and four others to arrest Leon, one of their victims. Socrates disobeyed, and he says in Plato's *Apology* that this might have cost him his life but for the counterrevolution of the next year.

In 399 Socrates was indicted for "impiety." The author of the proceedings was the influential Anytus, one of the two chiefs of the democrats restored by the counterrevolution of 403; but the nominal

prosecutor was the obscure and insignificant Meletus. There were two counts in the accusation, "corruption of the young" and "neglect of the gods whom the city worships and the practice of religious novelties." Socrates who treated the charge with contempt and made a "defense" that amounts to avowal and justification, was convicted, probably by 280 votes against 220. The prosecutors had asked for the penalty of death.

As a rule at Athens, the condemned man "drank the hemlock" within 24 hours, but, in the case of Socrates, the fact that no execution could take place during the absence of the sacred ship sent yearly to Delos caused an unexpected delay of a month, during which Socrates remained in prison, receiving his friends daily and conversing with them in his usual manner. An escape was planned by his friend Crito, but Socrates refused to hear of it, on the grounds that the verdict, though contrary to fact, was that of a legitimate court and must therefore be obeyed. The story of his last day, with drinking of the hemlock, has been perfectly told in the *Phaedo* of Plato, who, though not himself an eyewitness, was in close touch with many of those who were present.

Socrates gave not only his students, Plato, Aristotle, and Crito, but all his people in Athens moral lessons, not to violate the law, not to correct a mistake by committing another even worse mistake. Socrates, being a social reformer, fought corruption, bribery, slavery, hypocrisy, telling lies, offering loans by interest, adultery etc... On these grounds he refused to escape from prison by bribing the guards of the prison. This event was the last moral lesson he gave to his people just before his death.

## Chapter Two

### Plato, 428 BC – 348 BC

Plato, an ancient Greek philosopher, was the second of the great trio of ancient Greeks. Plato's name is generally associated with the history of Literary Criticism because, in a sense, all literary criticism is a footnote in his philosophy. His attack on poetry and his disparagement of its value and worth in society has occupied the minds of literary critics from Plato's time to the present. Moreover, all attacks on poetry can be traced back to his ideas.

Plato's works have come down to us in the form of dramatic dialogues in which the chief speaker is his master, Socrates. Of these dialogues 35 remain, the most important being *The Republic* which was political and sociological. Plato was the first philosopher to formulate the principles of ethics. His philosophy is social, and according to him justice and the good can only be completely attained in the social sphere, in which alone the life of the individual finds its true expression.

Before Plato there was no real literary criticism in the sense of a theory of literature. If we want to begin with general ideas on literature we must begin with Plato.

In order to understand Plato's philosophy we have to realize that he was reacting against the sophists who claimed that things are relative. Plato's philosophy is concerned with absolutes. This is why we can call Plato's philosophy a philosophy in search of certainty, in search of a reality that is absolute, fixed, and perfect.

Plato lived at a time when he felt that the Greek society needed a vigorous discipline. The Greeks esteemed poetry very high, and poets for them were teachers. Plato thought that the philosopher rather than the poet were needed. He held that the mind (represented by philosophy) was the supreme arbiter of the value of things and not the emotions (represented by poetry).

### ***THE REPUBLIC***

In *THE REPUBLIC*, Plato describes poetry as an imitation not of reality but of things in this world. Reality for Plato is unchangeable and perfect. Thus if a poet describes, say, a chair he is not describing the idea of the chair but an imitation of it. All the chairs in this world are imperfect imitations of the idea of the chair. For Plato, reality consists of the idea and nothing else.

Plato says that the charioteer knows more about chariot racing than Homer. He also says that every artisan knows more about his own craft than the poet who speaks of his craft. Thus, as a teacher the poet is inferior to the artisan. Since, then, the poet speaks, not from knowledge but from inspiration (or madness – for Plato it is much the same thing), he cannot be trusted as a teacher.

For Plato, therefore, poetry is twice removed from reality, because if a carpenter makes a chair he is once removed from reality, but when the poet comes and describes the chair, he is not describing the idea of the chair, but the already imperfect chair made by the carpenter. The same is true of painters, who do not deal with the idea of things, but with their reflections. Plato's world of reality or truth is accessible only through man's reason, not through his senses. This is why philosophy

is the guide to truth, whereas poetry remains merely an imitation of imitation.

Plato's objection to poetry: Plato was an enemy of poetry. He says: "poetry is dangerous". The poets, living and dead, were Plato's enemies. He calls them liars or imitators. Plato, however, approves of one type of poetry that we might call "didactic" poetry. That is poetry that teaches and edifies people according to the standards of the state.

Plato objects to poetry on three grounds:

- 1- For Plato poetry is false, it imitates an imitation. Poetry is an imitation of an imitation, and thus is twice removed from reality.
- 2- Poetry uses and appeals to the inferior part of the soul. Poetry employs emotions rather than mind. Hence, the poet does not deal with reality or with the essence of things rationally and logically but excitedly and superficially.
- 3- Poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up. Plato, because he is a philosopher, naturally opposes passions because they are detrimental to reason. A philosopher employs reason to persuade or dissuade. A poet would make the philosopher's job more difficult since poetry becomes his rival.

Plato's views on inspiration: Plato's ideas on inspiration are similar to the notions held by many people to explain the poet's ability to compose poetry. The Greeks thought that a poet is born, not made. He receives his inspiration from the gods or the Muses. The Muses in Greek Mythology were the nine daughters of Zeus. Each one of them inspired a special branch of learning and activity such as epic poetry, love poetry, lyric poetry, tragedy, song and dance, history, and

astronomy. What Plato has done is that instead of exulting the poet for his contact with the Muses, he attacks him for his lack of the knowledge of the things communicated by the Muses. The poet is possessed by the Muses just as a mad man is possessed by wild powers.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Aristotle, 384 BC – 322 BC**

Aristotle, the third of the Trio, is one of the greatest figures in the history of human thought whose ideas are still prevalent in philosophy, aesthetics, and literary criticism.

Aristotle says, "all men are mortal; Socrates is a man, therefore, Socrates is mortal. No one is immortal. Only God is."

Aristotle wrote many books, the most important ones are *The politics* and *The Poetics*.

#### ***The Politics***

In this book, Aristotle says that Politics should not be separated from ethics, but as the completion, and almost a verification of it.

According to Aristotle, the government must do its most to make the individual happy, because the individual is the base of a family and the family is placed prior to the state. He says that money is important, but one should not collect money for the sake of money. One's wealth should be used for the welfare of not only one's family but also for those who need it for the development of the society.

As for education, Aristotle says that education is the responsibility of the state. No one should remain illiterate. He laid rules and procedures

for educating all people starting with children. The state should be very serious in teaching and educating children, boys and girls. According to Aristotle, the child is the corner stone of the society. If children are neglected the whole society is doomed. Aristotle is against racial discrimination, superiors or inferiors all have equal lawful right.

### ***The Poetics***

*The Poetics* is a difficult and controversial book. Almost every single sentence in it has aroused problems, in some cases even books have been written on single words or concepts. Aristotle wrote two types of books: The first is addressed to general readers and it is called "esoteric". The second, addressed mainly to philosophers and specialists, and it is called "exoteric". The exoteric books are simple, straightforward, and direct because they are addressed to the layman. The esoteric books are highly specialized; they assume a good knowledge of Aristotle's philosophy, method, and terminology.

### **Catharsis:**

Pre-Aristotelian Use of the term "Catharsis":

Before Aristotle the term "Catharsis" was used in the following sense:

(a) Homeopathy: This is a type of treatment in medicine where one treats a patient by the cause of that disease. If a person is frightened by something, you treat him by exposing him to a more frightening experience.

(b) Hippocratic Medicine: This is a method of treatment by which a harmful or disturbing element is removed from the patient. The patient, in other words, is purged. He is cleansed and left healthy. The medical metaphor is usually translated as purgation.

(c) Religious meaning: This is the meaning that occurs in Plato where catharsis means the separation of the soul from the body. It is a process of purifying one's self from the fetters of the body. This is called purification.

Aristotelian Usage of "Catharsis":

Aristotle uses the word catharsis to refer to a type of music used to treat the enthusiast. The enthusiasts were people who were carried away by religious mania; they suffered from mental imbalance. Cathartic music was a type of music that restored balance to an imbalanced mind.

In *The Poetics* the term "Catharsis" refers to the effect of tragedy. It is a medical term with psychological implications and even perhaps some religious connotations, (since drama was originally associated with religious rituals).

Post-Aristotelian Usage of "Catharsis":

(a) In the renaissance and because of the domination of moral ideas, critics thought that catharsis performs some moral function on the audience.

(b) During Romanticism, the emphasis shifts from the reader (or the audience) to the poet himself. This is called "author's catharsis". That is the poet relieves his tension and worries by writing them out.

(c) In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "Catharsis" refers to the incidents of the tragedy rather than the audience's emotions. Thus catharsis means clarification, i.e. mental understanding of what goes on in front of the audience.

## Conclusion

The three great Greek philosophers, namely Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, were not only philosophers and scientists but also social reformers. They fought corruption in all its forms. During their time the Greek civilization reached its peak in knowledge, philosophy, and science. In fact they laid the foundations of the western civilizations. Their thoughts and ideas had logical, epistemological, and myth and they are occasionally mystical in tone. Their philosophy determined the orientation and the content of Western intellectual history.

Socrates accepted the penalty of death although he was innocent and preferred to die in prison rather than violate the law and escape from prison. He gave his people the best example of obedience and self sacrifice.

Plato, in his *The Republic* hates poetry because he thought that it is dangerous and it corrupts the young. He only approves of didactic poetry which teaches people specially the young morality.

Aristotle, in his *The Politics* says that the state should try its best to make the individual happy because the individual is the base of the family and the family is the base of the society and the government comes from the society.

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