[Ancient] Greek philosophy, to be sure, is not a single doctrine. It encompasses a wide variety of ideas, thoughts, and theories, conflicting or otherwise. Like “Oriental philosophy,” Greek philosophy is a result of continuous observation of nature, of man, and the social world. But unlike “Oriental philosophy,” which is said to be more “mystical,” Greek philosophy [as claimed by many of today’s “philosophers”] is the “real” philosophy. This is to say that Oriental philosophy is more of a religion than philosophy. Pariñas (2011) would further contend that there is only Greek philosophy for “philosophy is fundamentally and undeniably Greek.” There could be French, German, American, Chinese, or Filipino philosophers, but there can be no French, German, American, Chinese, or Filipino “philosophy”, Pariñas argues.

Historically, “Western philosophical tradition began in ancient Greece in the 6th century B.C.E.” with the so-called “pre-Socratic” philosophers like Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Pythagoras. Pythagoras is said to be the source of the meaning of philosophy, which means “love of wisdom”. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle would follow these preSocratics,” (Anonymous (2001) in Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2010) who were branded as “sophists”—depicted as using fallacious reasoning.

In this paper, I will present selected thoughts from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle based from their translated writings and from selected writings about them. The contents of this paper are not comprehensive enough to cover the wide areas of ancient Greek philosophy. To begin with, let me present a short background about the three philosophers.

Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.) Socrates is the “son of Sophroniscus” (Plato, 380 B.C./1871) and the husband of Xanthippe, a wife imagined to be “the most shrewish” according to a man named Antisthenes (Xenophon, n.d./1897). Some sources say that “Socrates was often to be found where youths of the city spent their time” (Nails, 2010). There are no known writings of Socrates; hence, much of his thoughts are reflected in the writings of his students, particularly Plato. This implies then that to talk about Socrates’ philosophy is to talk about Plato’s philosophy (& vice versa). As to why Socrates did not write his teachings is a topic worth considering, but is not within the scope of this paper.

Plato (427-347 B.C.E.) Plato is regarded as Socrates’ friend and prominent student. After serving in the military, he joined politics but later got disillusioned with how the oligarchs of Athens managed the affairs of the state. He attempted to continue his political career after the restoration of democracy in Athens in 403 BCE but realized that the “excesses of political life” are too much for him. After the death of Socrates in 399 BCE, Plato traveled to other countries. He once more served as a soldier in a war and when he returned to Athens, he founded his “Academy”, which was primarily “devoted to research and instruction in philosophy and the sciences.” Through the Academy, Plato dreamed of training “young men who would become statesmen” capable of improving “the political leadership of the cities of Greece.” (O’Connor and Robertson, 1999)
Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) Aristotle studied in Plato’s Academy at about 17 years old. After Plato’s death in 347 BCE, he left Athens and continued his philosophical activity elsewhere. In 343 BCE, he went to Macedonia upon the request of the king. There, he tutored the young Alexander [the Great]. In 335 BCE, Aristotle established his “Lyceum”. Members of the Lyceum engaged themselves with researches over a wide range of subjects from natural sciences to politics to medicine to arts to theology to history, etc. Soon, he left Athens with the excuse of fear for his life because at that time, tensions were growing between Athens and Macedonia. Tales would say that “he saw no reason to permit Athens to sin twice against philosophy.” (Shields, 2012)

Some thoughts of the Greek Philosophers

Socrates/Plato [as deduced from Plato’s (380 B.C.) “Republic”, translated by Grube, 1992]

On wealth. “You don’t seem to love money too much. And those who haven’t made their own money are usually like you. But those who have made it for themselves are twice as fond of it… This makes them poor company, for they haven’t a good word to say about anything except money.” [An observation Socrates made about the wealthy old man, Cephalus who claimed that he is “satisfied to leave (his) sons not less but a little more than (he) inherited.”] (Book I, 330c)

On rulers. “No on in any position of rule, insofar as he is a ruler, seeks or orders what is advantageous to himself, but what is advantageous to his subjects; the ones of whom he is himself the craftsman. It is to his subjects and what is advantageous and proper to them that he looks, and everything he says and does, he says and does for them.” (Book I, 342e) Surely, then, no doctor, insofar as he is a doctor, seeks or orders what is advantageous to himself, but what is advantageous to his patient.” (Book I, 342d) “Until philosophers rule as kings or those… kings and leading mean genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide, cities will have no rest from evils…” (Book V, 473d)

On guardians. “Philosophy, spirit, speed, and strength must all, then, be combined in the nature of anyone who is to be fine and good guardian of our city.” (Book II, 376c)

On economic sufficiency. “Our citizens must not only produce enough for themselves at home but also goods of the right quality and quantity to satisfy the requirements of others.” (Book II, 371a)

On justice. “Justice is virtue and wisdom and that injustice is vice and ignorance.” (Book I, 350d) “Each thing to which a particular function is assigned also [has] a virtue.” (Book I, 353b) “The function…of anything else [is] that which one can do only with it or best with it… [like] it is [not] possible to see with anything other than the eyes…or hear anything other than ears.” (Book I, 352e)

On specialization. “More plentiful and better-quality goods are more easily produced if each person does one thing for which he is naturally suited, does it at the right time, and is released from having to do any of the others.” (Book II, 370c) “Each individual would do a fine job of one occupation, not of many, and that if he tried the latter and dabbled in many things, he’d surely fail to achieve distinction in any of them.” (Book III, 394e)
On education. “Education isn’t…putting knowledge into souls that lack it,…[for] the power to learn is present in everyone’s soul…The instrument with which each learns [turns around] the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one you call good.” (Book VII, 518c-d).

On educating children. “You know, don’t you, that the beginning of any process is most important, especially for anything young and tender? It’s at the time that it is most malleable and takes on any pattern one wishes to impress on it.” (Book II, 377b) “The young can’t distinguish what is allegorical from what isn’t, and the opinions they absorb at that age are hard to erase and apt to become unalterable. For these reasons, then, we should probably take the utmost care to insure that the first stories they hear about virtue are the best ones for them to hear.” (Book II, 378e)

On War. “But war, whether external or civil, is not the best, and the need of either is to be deprecated; but peace with one another, and good will, are best…” (Laws, 360 B.C.E., Trans. Jowett)

Aristotle

On City/State. “It is clear that all partnerships aim at some good, and that the partnership that is most authoritative of all and embraces all the others does so particularly, and aims at the most authoritative good of all. This is what is called the city or the political partnership. (Politics, 350 B.C.E./1984, p. 35)”

“The partnership arising from [the union of] several villages that is complete is the city. It reaches a level of full self-sufficiency, so to speak; and while coming into being for the sake of living, it exists for the sake of living well. Every city, therefore, exists by nature… and that man is by nature a political animal. That man is much more than a political animal than any kind of bee or herd of animal is clear... and man alone among the animals has speech...For it is peculiar to man as compared to the other animals that he alone has a perception of good and bad and just and unjust and other things; and partnership in these things is what makes a household and a city...That the city is both by nature and prior to each individual, then, is clear. For if the individual when separated [from it] is not self-sufficient... One who is incapable of participating or who is in need of nothing through being self-sufficient is no part of a city, and so is either a beast or a god.” (Politics, 350 B.C.E./1984, p. 35-37)

On Ruler-Subjects. “For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule...The lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master... Hence, where the relation of master and slave between them is natural they are friends and have a common interest, but where it rests merely on law and force the reverse is true.”

“Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.”(Politics, 350 B.C.E./Trans. Jowett, n.d.)

On citizens. “The citizen whom we are seeking to define is a citizen in the strictest sense, against whom no such exception can be taken, and his special characteristic is that he shares in the administration of justice, and in offices...best adapted to the citizen of a democracy”
On wealth. “Property is a part of the household, and the art of acquiring property is a part of the art of managing the household; for no man can live well, or indeed live at all, unless he be provided with necessaries.” (Politics, 350 B.C.E./Trans. Jowett, n.d.)

“Some persons are led to believe that getting wealth is the object of household management, and the whole idea of their lives is that they ought either to increase their money without limit, or at any rate not to lose it. The origin of this disposition in men is that they are intent upon living only and not upon living well; and, as their desires are unlimited they also desire that the means of gratifying them should be without limit.” (Politics, 350 B.C.E./Trans. Jowett, n.d.)

“There are two sorts of wealth-getting, as I have said; one is a part of household management, the other is retail trade: the former necessary and honorable, while that which consists in exchange is justly censured; for it is unnatural, and a mode by which men gain from one another. The most hated sort, and with the greatest reason, is usury, which makes a gain out of money itself, and not from the natural object of it. For money was intended to be used in exchange, but not to increase at interest. And this term interest, which means the birth of money from money, is applied to the breeding of money because the offspring resembles the parent. Wherefore of all modes of getting wealth this is the most unnatural.” (Politics, 350 B.C.E./Trans. Jowett, n.d.)

On education. “The legislator should direct his attention above all to the education of youth; for the neglect of education does harm to the constitution The citizen should be molded to suit the form of government under which he lives.” (Politics, 350 B.C.E./Trans. Jowett, n.d.)

“And since the whole city has one end, it is manifest that education should be one and the same for all, and that it should be public, and not private…the training in things which are of common interest should be the same for all…Some others…are to be praised, for they take the greatest pains about their children, and make education the business of the state.” (Politics, 350 B.C.E./Trans. Jowett, n.d.)

“Now each man judges well the things he knows, and of these he is good judge. And so the man who has been educated in a subject is good judge of that subject, and the man who has received an all-round education is a good judge in general.” (Politics, 350 B.C.E./Trans. Jowett, n.d.)

On amusement. “We should introduce amusements only at suitable times, and they should be our medicines, for the emotion which they create in the soul is a relaxation, and from the pleasure we obtain rest. But leisure of itself gives pleasure and happiness and enjoyment of life, which are experienced, not by the busy man, but by those who have leisure.” (Politics, 350 B.C.E./Trans. Jowett, n.d.)

On virtue. “Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate.” (Nicomachean Ethics, Trans. Ross)
References:


