

Sophie's World

A Novel about the History of Philosophy

Jostien Gaarder

Translated by Paulette Miller

More praise for the international bestseller that has become:
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*He who cannot draw on three thousand years
Is living from hand to mouth*

GOETHE

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

At some point something must have come from nothing.

Sophie Amundsen was on her way home from school. She had walked the first part of the way with Joanna. They had been discussing robots. Joanna thought the human brain was like an advanced computer. Sophie was not certain she agreed. Surely a person was more than a piece of hardware?

When they got to the supermarket they went their separate ways. Sophie lived on the outskirts of a sprawling suburb and had almost twice as far to school as Joanna. There were no other houses beyond her garden, which made it seem as if her house lay at the end of the world. This was where the woods began.

She turned the corner into Clover Close. At the end of the road there was a sharp bend, known as Captain's Bend. People seldom went that way except on the weekend.

It was early May. In some of the gardens the fruit trees were encircled with dense clusters of daffodils. The birches were already in pale green leaf.

It was extraordinary how everything burst forth at this time of year! What made this great mass of green vegetation come welling up from the dead earth as soon as it got warm and the last traces of snow disappeared?

As Sophie opened her garden gate, she looked in the mailbox. There was usually a lot of junk mail and a few big envelopes for her mother, a pile to dump on the kitchen table before she went up to her room to start her homework.

From time to time there would be a few letters from the bank for her father, but then he was not a normal father. Sophie's father was the captain of a big oil tanker, and was away for most of the year.

During the few weeks at a time when he was at home, he would shuffle around the house making it nice and cozy for Sophie and her mother. But when he was at sea he could seem very distant.

There was only one letter in the mailbox—and it was for

Sophie. The white envelope read: “Sophie Amundsen, 3 Clover Close.” That was all; it did not say who it was from. There was no stamp on it either.

As soon as Sophie had closed the gate behind her she opened the envelope. It contained only a slip of paper no bigger than the envelope. It read: Who are you?

Nothing else, only the three words, written by hand, and followed by a large question mark.

She looked at the envelope again. The letter was definitely for her. Who could have dropped it in the mailbox?

Sophie let herself quickly into the red house. As always, her cat Sherekan managed to slink out of the bushes, jump onto the front step, and slip in through the door before she closed it behind her.

Whenever Sophie’s mother was in a bad mood, she would call the house they lived in a menagerie. A menagerie was a collection of animals. Sophie certainly had one and was quite happy with it. It had begun with the three goldfish, Goldtop, Red Ridinghood, and Black Jack. Next she got two budgerigars called Smitt and Smule, then Govinda the tortoise, and finally the marmalade cat Sherekan. They had all been given to her to make up for the fact that her mother never got home from work until late in the afternoon and her father was away so much, sailing all over the world.

Sophie slung her schoolbag on the floor and put a bowl of cat food out for Sherekan. Then she sat down on a kitchen stool with the mysterious letter in her hand.

Who are you?

She had no idea. She was Sophie Amundsen, of course, but who was that? She had not really figured that out—yet.

What if she had been given a different name? Anne Knutsen, for instance. Would she then have been someone else?

She suddenly remembered that Dad had originally wanted her to be called Lillemor. Sophie tried to imagine herself shaking hands and introducing herself as Lillemor Amundsen, but it seemed all wrong. It was someone else who kept introducing herself.

She jumped up and went into the bathroom with the strange letter in her hand. She stood in front of the mirror and stared into her

own eyes.

“I am Sophie Amundsen,” she said.

The girl in the mirror did not react with as much as a twitch. Whatever Sophie did, she did exactly the same. Sophie tried to beat her reflection to it with a lightning movement but the other girl was just as fast.

“Who are you?” Sophie asked.

She received no response to this either, but felt a momentary confusion as to whether it was she or her reflection who had asked the question.

Sophie pressed her index finger to the nose in the mirror and said, “You are me.” As she got no answer to this, she turned the sentence around and said, “I am you.”

Sophie Amundsen was often dissatisfied with her appearance. She was frequently told that she had beautiful almond-shaped eyes, but that was probably just something people said because her nose was too small and her mouth was a bit too big. And her ears were much too close to her eyes. Worst of all was her straight hair, which it was impossible to do anything with. Sometimes her father would stroke her hair and call her “the girl with the flaxen hair,” after a piece of music by Claude Debussy. It was all right for him, he was not condemned to living with this straight dark hair. Neither mousse nor styling gel had the slightest effect on Sophie’s hair. Sometimes she thought she was so ugly that she wondered if she was malformed at birth. Her mother always went on about her difficult labor. But was that really what determined how you looked?

Wasn’t it odd that she didn’t know who she was? And wasn’t it unreasonable that she hadn’t been allowed to have any say in what she would look like? Her looks had just been dumped on her. She could choose her own friends, but she certainly hadn’t chosen herself. She had not even chosen to be a human being.

What was a human being?

Sophie looked up at the girl in the mirror again.

“I think I’ll go upstairs and do my biology homework,” she said, almost apologetically. Once she was out in the hall, she thought, No, I’d rather go out in the garden.

“Kitty, kitty, kitty!”

Sophie chased the cat out onto the doorstep and closed the front door behind her.

As she stood outside on the gravel path with the mysterious letter in her hand, the strangest feeling came over her. She felt like a doll that had suddenly been brought to life by the wave of a magic wand.

Wasn't it extraordinary to be in the world right now, wandering around in a wonderful adventure!

Sherekan sprang lightly across the gravel and slid into a dense clump of red-currant bushes. A live cat, vibrant with energy from its white whiskers to the twitching tail at the end of its sleek body. It was here in the garden too, but hardly aware of it in the same way as Sophie.

As Sophie started to think about being alive, she began to realize that she would not be alive forever. I am in the world now, she thought, but one day I shall be gone.

Was there a life after death? This was another question the cat was blissfully unaware of.

It was not long since Sophie's grandmother had died. For more than six months Sophie had missed her every single day. How unfair that life had to end!

Sophie stood on the gravel path, thinking. She tried to think extra hard about being alive so as to forget that she would not be alive forever. But it was impossible. As soon as she concentrated on being alive now, the thought of dying also came into her mind. The same thing happened the other way around: only by conjuring up an intense feeling of one day being dead could she appreciate how terribly good it was to be alive. It was like two sides of a coin that she kept turning over and over. And the bigger and clearer one side of the coin became, the bigger and clearer the other side became too.

You can't experience being alive without realizing that you have to die, she thought. But it's just as impossible to realize you have to die without thinking how incredibly amazing it is to be alive.

Sophie remembered Granny saying something like that the day the doctor told her she was ill. “I never realized how rich life was

until now," she said.

How tragic that most people had to get ill before they understood what a gift it was to be alive. Or else they had to find a mysterious letter in the mailbox!

Perhaps she should go and see if any more letters had arrived. Sophie hurried to the gate and looked inside the green mailbox. She was startled to find that it contained another white envelope, exactly like the first. But the mailbox had definitely been empty when she took the first envelope! This envelope had her name on it as well. She tore it open and fished out a note the same size as the first one.

Where does the world come from? it said.

I don't know, Sophie thought. Surely nobody really knows. And yet—Sophie thought it was a fair question. For the first time in her life she felt it wasn't right to live in the world without at least inquiring where it came from.

The mysterious letters had made Sophie's head spin. She decided to go and sit in the den.

The den was Sophie's top secret hiding place. It was where she went when she was terribly angry, terribly miserable, or terribly happy. Today she was simply confused.

The red house was surrounded by a large garden with lots of flowerbeds, fruit bushes, fruit trees of different kinds, a spacious lawn with a glider and a little gazebo that Granddad had built for Granny when she lost their first child a few weeks after it was born. The child's name was Marie. On her gravestone were the words: "Little Marie to us came, greeted us, and left again."

Down in a corner of the garden behind all the raspberry bushes was a dense thicket where neither flowers nor berries would grow. Actually, it was an old hedge that had once marked the boundary to the woods, but because nobody had trimmed it for the last twenty years it had grown into a tangled and impenetrable mass. Granny used to say the hedge made it harder for the foxes to take the chickens during the war, when the chickens had free range of the garden.

To everyone but Sophie, the old hedge was just as useless as the rabbit hutches at the other end of the garden. But that was only

because they hadn't discovered Sophie's secret.

Sophie had known about the little hole in the hedge for as long as she could remember. When she crawled through it she came into a large cavity between the bushes. It was like a little house. She knew nobody would find her there.

Clutching the two envelopes in her hand, Sophie ran through the garden, crouched down on all fours, and wormed her way through the hedge. The den was almost high enough for her to stand upright, but today she sat down on a clump of gnarled roots. From there she could look out through tiny peepholes between the twigs and leaves. Although none of the holes was bigger than a small coin, she had a good view of the whole garden. When she was little she used to think it was fun to watch her mother and father searching for her among the trees.

Sophie had always thought the garden was a world of its own. Each time she heard about the Garden of Eden in the Bible it reminded her of sitting here in the den, surveying her own little paradise.

Where does the world come from?

She hadn't the faintest idea. Sophie knew that the world was only a small planet in space. But where did space come from?

It was possible that space had always existed, in which case she would not also need to figure out where it came from. But could anything have always existed? Something deep down inside her protested at the idea. Surely everything that exists must have had a beginning? So space must sometime have been created out of something else.

But if space had come from something else, then that something else must also have come from something. Sophie felt she was only deferring the problem. At some point, something must have come from nothing. But was that possible? Wasn't that just as impossible as the idea that the world had always existed?

They had learned at school that God created the world. Sophie tried to console herself with the thought that this was probably the best solution to the whole problem. But then she started to think again. She could accept that God had created space, but what about

God himself? Had he created himself out of nothing? Again there was something deep down inside her that protested. Even though God could create all kinds of things, he could hardly create himself before he had a “self” to create with. So there was only one possibility left: God had always existed. But she had already rejected that possibility! Everything that existed had to have a beginning.

Oh, drat!

She opened the two envelopes again.

Who are you?

Where does the world come from?

What annoying questions! And anyway where did the letters come from? That was just as mysterious, almost.

Who had jolted Sophie out of her everyday existence and suddenly brought her face to face with the great riddles of the universe?

For the third time Sophie went to the mailbox. The mailman had just delivered the day’s mail.

Sophie fished out a bulky pile of junk mail, periodicals, and a couple of letters for her mother. There was also a postcard of a tropical beach. She turned the card over. It had a Norwegian stamp on it and was postmarked “UN Battalion.” Could it be from Dad? But wasn’t he in a completely different place? It wasn’t his handwriting either.

Sophie felt her pulse quicken a little as she saw who the postcard was addressed to: “Hilde Moller Knag, c/o Sophie Amundsen, 3 Clover Close ...” The rest of the address was correct. The card read:

Dear Hilde, Happy 15th birthday! As I’m sure you’ll understand, I want to give you a present that will help you grow. Forgive me for sending the card c/o Sophie. It was the easiest way. Love from Dad.

Sophie raced back to the house and into the kitchen. Her mind was in a turmoil. Who was this “Hilde,” whose fifteenth birthday

was just a month before her own?

Sophie got out the telephone book. There were a lot of people called Moller, and quite a few called Knag. But there was nobody in the entire directory called Moller Knag.

She examined the mysterious card again. It certainly seemed genuine enough; it had a stamp and a postmark.

Why would a father send a birthday card to Sophie's address when it was quite obviously intended to go somewhere else? What kind of father would cheat his own daughter of a birthday card by purposely sending it astray? How could it be "the easiest way"? And above all, how was she supposed to trace this Hilde person?

So now Sophie had another problem to worry about. She tried to get her thoughts in order:

This afternoon, in the space of two short hours, she had been presented with three problems. The first problem was who had put the two white envelopes in her mailbox. The second was the difficult questions these letters contained. The third problem was who Hilde Moller Knag could be, and why Sophie had been sent her birthday card. She was sure that the three problems were interconnected in some way. They had to be, because until today she had lived a perfectly ordinary life.

THE TOP HAT

*... the only thing we require
to be good philosophers is the
faculty of wonder...*

Sophie was sure she would hear from the anonymous letter writer again. She decided not to tell anyone about the letters for the time being.

At school she had trouble concentrating on what the teachers said. They seemed to talk only about unimportant things. Why couldn't they talk about what a human being is—or about what the world is and how it came into being?

For the first time she began to feel that at school as well as everywhere else people were only concerned with trivialities. There were major problems that needed to be solved.

Did anybody have answers to these questions? Sophie felt that thinking about them was more important than memorizing irregular verbs.

When the bell rang after the last class, she left the school so fast that Joanna had to run to catch up with her.

After a while Joanna said, "Do you want to play cards this evening?" Sophie shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm not that interested in card games anymore." Joanna looked surprised.

"You're not? Let's play badminton then."

Sophie stared down at the pavement—then up at her friend. "I don't think I'm that interested in badminton either." "You're kidding!"

Sophie noticed the touch of bitterness in Joanna's tone. "Do you mind telling me what's suddenly so important?" Sophie just shook her head. "It's ... it's a secret."

"Yuck! You're probably in love!"

The two girls walked on for a while without saying anything. When they got to the soccer field Joanna said, "I'm going across the field."

Across the field! It was the quickest way for Joanna, but she only went that way when she had to hurry home in time for visitors or a dental appointment.

Sophie regretted having been mean to her. But what else could she have said? That she had suddenly become so engrossed in who she was and where the world came from that she had no time to play badminton? Would Joanna have understood?

Why was it so difficult to be absorbed in the most vital and, in a way, the most natural of all questions?

She felt her heart beating faster as she opened the mailbox. At first she found only a letter from the bank and some big brown envelopes for her mother. Darn! Sophie had been looking forward to getting another letter from the unknown sender.

As she closed the gate behind her she noticed her own name on one of the big envelopes. Turning it over, she saw written on the back: "Course in Philosophy. Handle with care."

Sophie ran up the gravel path and flung her schoolbag onto the step. Stuffing the other letters under the doormat, she ran around into the back garden and sought refuge in the den. This was the only place to open the big letter.

Sherekan came jumping after her but Sophie had to put up with that. She knew the cat would not give her away.

Inside the envelope there were three typewritten pages held together with a paper clip. Sophie began to read.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

Dear Sophie,

Lots of people have hobbies. Some people collect old coins or foreign stamps, some do needlework, others spend most of their spare time on a particular sport.

A lot of people enjoy reading. But reading tastes differ widely. Some people only read newspapers or comics, some like reading novels, while others prefer books on astronomy, wildlife, or technological discoveries.

If I happen to be interested in horses or precious stones, I cannot expect everyone else to share my enthusiasm. If I watch all the sports programs on TV with great pleasure, I must put up with the fact that other people find sports boring.

Is there nothing that interests us all? Is there nothing that concerns everyone—no matter who they are or where they live in the world? Yes, dear Sophie, there are questions that certainly should interest everyone. They are precisely the questions this course is about.

What is the most important thing in life? If we ask someone living on the edge of starvation, the answer is food. If we ask someone dying of cold, the answer is warmth. If we put the same question to someone who feels lonely and isolated, the answer will probably be the company of other people.

But when these basic needs have been satisfied—will there still be something that everybody needs? Philosophers think so. They believe that man cannot live by bread alone. Of course everyone needs food. And everyone needs love and care. But there is something else—apart from that—which everyone needs, and that is to figure out who we are and why we are here.

Being interested in why we are here is not a “casual” interest like collecting stamps.

People who ask such questions are taking part in a debate that has gone on as long as man has lived on this planet. How the universe, the earth, and life came into being is a bigger and more important question than who won the most gold medals in the last Olympics.

The best way of approaching philosophy is to ask a few philosophical questions:

How was the world created? Is there any will or meaning behind what happens? Is there a life after death? How can we answer these questions? And most important, how ought we to live? People have been asking these questions throughout the ages. We know of no culture which has not concerned itself with what man is and where the world came from.

Basically there are not many philosophical questions to ask.

We have already asked some of the most important ones. But history presents us with many different answers to each question. So it is easier to ask philosophical questions than to answer them.

Today as well each individual has to discover his own answer to these same questions. You cannot find out whether there is a God or whether there is life after death by looking in an encyclopedia. Nor does the encyclopedia tell us how we ought to live. However, reading what other people have believed can help us formulate our own view of life.

Philosophers' search for the truth resembles a detective story. Some think Andersen was the murderer, others think it was Nielsen or Jensen. The police are sometimes able to solve a real crime. But it is equally possible that they never get to the bottom of it, although there is a solution somewhere. So even if it is difficult to answer a question, there may be one—and only one—right answer. Either there is a kind of existence after death—or there is not.

A lot of age-old enigmas have now been explained by science. What the dark side of the moon looks like was once shrouded in mystery. It was not the kind of thing that could be solved by discussion, it was left to the imagination of the individual. But today we know exactly what the dark side of the moon looks like, and no one can “believe” any longer in the Man in the Moon, or that the moon is made of green cheese.

A Greek philosopher who lived more than two thousand years ago believed that philosophy had its origin in man's sense of wonder. Man thought it was so astonishing to be alive that philosophical questions arose of their own accord.

It is like watching a magic trick. We cannot understand how it is done. So we ask: how can the magician change a couple of white silk scarves into a live rabbit?

A lot of people experience the world with the same incredulity as when a magician suddenly pulls a rabbit out of a hat which has just been shown to them empty.

In the case of the rabbit, we know the magician has tricked us. What we would like to know is just how he did it. But when it comes to the world it's somewhat different. We know that the world is not

all sleight of hand and deception because here we are in it, we are part of it. Actually, we are the white rabbit being pulled out of the hat. The only difference between us and the white rabbit is that the rabbit does not realize it is taking part in a magic trick. Unlike us. We feel we are part of something mysterious and we would like to know how it all works.

P.S. As far as the white rabbit is concerned, it might be better to compare it with the whole universe. We who live here are microscopic insects existing deep down in the rabbit's fur. But philosophers are always trying to climb up the fine hairs of the fur in order to stare right into the magician's eyes.

Are you still there, Sophie? To be continued . . .

Sophie was completely exhausted. Still there? She could not even remember if she had taken the time to breathe while she read.

Who had brought this letter? It couldn't be the same person who had sent the birthday card to Hilde Moller Knag because that card had both a stamp and a postmark. The brown envelope had been delivered by hand to the mailbox exactly like the two white ones.

Sophie looked at her watch. It was a quarter to three. Her mother would not be home from work for over two hours.

Sophie crawled out into the garden again and ran to the mailbox. Perhaps there was another letter. She found one more brown envelope with her name on it. This time she looked all around but there was nobody in sight. Sophie ran to the edge of the woods and looked down the path.

No one was there. Suddenly she thought she heard a twig snap deep in the woods. But she was not completely sure, and anyway it would be pointless to chase after someone who was determined to get away.

Sophie let herself into the house. She ran upstairs to her room and took out a big cookie tin full of pretty stones. She emptied the stones onto the floor and put both large envelopes into the tin. Then she hurried out into the garden again, holding the tin securely with both hands. Before she went she put some food out for Sherekan.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty!"

Once back in the den she opened the second brown envelope

and drew out the new typewritten pages. She began to read.

A STRANGE CREATURE

Hello again! As you see, this short course in philosophy will come in handy-sized portions. Here are a few more introductory remarks:

Did I say that the only thing we require to be good philosophers is the faculty of wonder? If I did not, I say it now: **THE ONLY THING WE REQUIRE TO BE GOOD PHILOSOPHERS IS THE FACULTY OF WONDER.**

Babies have this faculty. That is not surprising. After a few short months in the womb they slip out into a brand-new reality. But as they grow up the faculty of wonder seems to diminish. Why is this? Do you know?

If a newborn baby could talk, it would probably say something about what an extraordinary world it had come into. We see how it looks around and reaches out in curiosity to everything it sees.

As words are gradually acquired, the child looks up and says “Bow-wow” every time it sees a dog. It jumps up and down in its stroller, waving its arms: “Bow-wow! Bow-wow!” We who are older and wiser may feel somewhat exhausted by the child’s enthusiasm. “All right, all right, it’s a bow-wow,” we say, unimpressed. “Please sit still.” We are not enthralled. We have seen a dog before.

This rapturous performance may repeat itself hundreds of times before the child learns to pass a dog without going crazy. Or an elephant, or a hippopotamus. But long before the child learns to talk properly—and long before it learns to think philosophically—the world we have become a habit.

A pity, if you ask me.

My concern is that you do not grow up to be one of those people who take the world for granted, Sophie dear. So just to make sure, we are going to do a couple of experiments in thought before we begin on the course itself.

Imagine that one day you are out for a walk in the woods. Suddenly you see a small spaceship on the path in front of you. A

tiny Martian climbs out of the spaceship and stands on the ground looking up at you . . .

What would you think? Never mind, it's not important. But have you ever given any thought to the fact that you are a Martian yourself?

It is obviously unlikely that you will ever stumble upon a creature from another planet. We do not even know that there is life on other planets. But you might stumble upon yourself one day. You might suddenly stop short and see yourself in a completely new light. On just such a walk in the woods.

I am an extraordinary being, you think. I am a mysterious creature.

You feel as if you are waking from an enchanted slumber. Who am I? you ask. You know that you are stumbling around on a planet in the universe. But what is the universe?

If you discover yourself in this manner you will have discovered something as mysterious as the Martian we just mentioned. You will not only have seen a being from outer space.

You will feel deep down that you are yourself an extraordinary being.

Do you follow me, Sophie? Let's do another experiment in thought:

One morning, Mom, Dad, and little Thomas, aged two or three, are having breakfast in the kitchen. After a while Mom gets up and goes over to the kitchen sink, and Dad—yes, Dad—flies up and floats around under the ceiling while Thomas sits watching. What do you think Thomas says? Perhaps he points up at his father and says: "Daddy's flying!" Thomas will certainly be astonished, but then he very often is. Dad does so many strange things that this business of a little flight over the breakfast table makes no difference to him. Every day Dad shaves with a funny machine, sometimes he climbs onto the roof and turns the TV aerial—or else he sticks his head under the hood of the car and comes up black in the face.

Now it's Mom's turn. She hears what Thomas says and turns around abruptly. How do you think she reacts to the sight of Dad floating nonchalantly over the kitchen table?

She drops the jam jar on the floor and screams with fright. She may even need medical attention once Dad has returned respectably to his chair. (He should have learned better table manners by now!) Why do you think Thomas and his mother react so differently?

It all has to do with habit. (Note this!) Mom has learned that people cannot fly. Thomas has not. He still isn't certain what you can and cannot do in this world.

But what about the world itself, Sophie? Do you think it can do what it does? The world is also floating in space.

Sadly it is not only the force of gravity we get used to as we grow up. The world itself becomes a habit in no time at all. It seems as if in the process of growing up we lose the ability to wonder about the world. And in doing so, we lose something central—something philosophers try to restore. For somewhere inside ourselves, something tells us that life is a huge mystery. This is something we once experienced, long before we learned to think the thought.

To be more precise: Although philosophical questions concern us all, we do not all become philosophers. For various reasons most people get so caught up in everyday affairs that their astonishment at the world gets pushed into the background. (They crawl deep into the rabbit's fur, snuggle down comfortably, and stay there for the rest of their lives.)

To children, the world and everything in it is new, something that gives rise to astonishment. It is not like that for adults. Most adults accept the world as a matter of course.

This is precisely where philosophers are a notable exception. A philosopher never gets quite used to the world. To him or her, the world continues to seem a bit unreasonable—bewildering, even enigmatic. Philosophers and small children thus have an important faculty in common. You might say that throughout his life a philosopher remains as thin-skinned as a child.

So now you must choose, Sophie. Are you a child who has not yet become world-weary?

Or are you a philosopher who will vow never to become so?

If you just shake your head, not recognizing yourself as either a child or a philosopher, then you have gotten so used to the world

that it no longer astonishes you. Watch out! You are on thin ice. And this is why you are receiving this course in philosophy, just in case. I will not allow you, of all people, to join the ranks of the apathetic and the indifferent. I want you to have an inquiring mind.

The whole course is free of charge, so you get no money back if you do not complete it. If you choose to break off the course you are free to do so. In that case you must leave a message for me in the mailbox. A live frog would be eminently suitable. Something green, at least, otherwise the mailman might get scared.

To summarize briefly: A white rabbit is pulled out of a top hat. Because it is an extremely large rabbit, the trick takes many billions of years. All mortals are born at the very tip of the rabbit's fine hairs, where they are in a position to wonder at the impossibility of the trick. But as they grow older they work themselves ever deeper into the fur. And there they stay. They become so comfortable they never risk crawling back up the fragile hairs again. Only philosophers embark on this perilous expedition to the outermost reaches of language and existence. Some of them fall off, but others cling on desperately and yell at the people nestling deep in the snug softness, stuffing themselves with delicious food and drink.

"Ladies and gentlemen," they yell, "we are floating in space!" But none of the people down there care.

"What a bunch of troublemakers!" they say. And they keep on chatting: Would you pass the butter, please? How much have our stocks risen today? What is the price of tomatoes?

Have you heard that Princess Di is expecting again?

When Sophie's mother got home later that afternoon, Sophie was practically in shock. The tin containing the letters from the mysterious philosopher was safely hidden in the den. Sophie had tried to start her homework but could only sit thinking about what she had read.

She had never thought so hard before! She was no longer a child—but she wasn't really grown up either. Sophie realized that she had already begun to crawl down into the cozy rabbit's fur, the very same rabbit that had been pulled from the top hat of the universe. But the philosopher had stopped her. He—or was it a

she?—had grabbed her by the back of the neck and pulled her up again to the tip of the fur where she had played as a child. And there, on the outermost tips of the fine hairs, she was once again seeing the world as if for the very first time.

The philosopher had rescued her. No doubt about it. The unknown letter writer had saved her from the triviality of everyday existence.

When Mom got home at five o'clock, Sophie dragged her into the living room and pushed her into an armchair.

"Mom—don't you think it's astonishing to be alive?" she began.

Her mother was so surprised that she didn't answer at first. Sophie was usually doing her homework when she got home.

"I suppose I do—sometimes," she said.

"Sometimes? Yes, but—don't you think it's astonishing that the world exists at all?" "Now look, Sophie. Stop talking like that."

"Why? Perhaps you think the world is quite normal?" "Well, isn't it? More or less, anyway."

Sophie saw that the philosopher was right. Grownups took the world for granted. They had let themselves be lulled into the enchanted sleep of their humdrum existence once and for all.

"You've just grown so used to the world that nothing surprises you anymore." "What on earth are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you getting so used to everything. Totally dim, in other words." "I will not be spoken to like that, Sophie!"

"All right, I'll put it another way. You've made yourself comfortable deep down in the fur of a white rabbit that is being pulled out of the universe's top hat right now. And in a minute you'll put the potatoes on. Then you'll read the paper and after half an hour's nap you'll watch the news on TV!"

An anxious expression came over her mother's face. She did indeed go into the kitchen and put the potatoes on. After a while she came back into the living room, and this time it was she who pushed Sophie into an armchair.

"There's something I must talk to you about," she began. Sophie could tell by her voice that it was something serious.

“You haven’t gotten yourself mixed up with drugs, have you, dear?”

Sophie was just about to laugh, but she understood why the question was being brought up now. “Are you nuts?” she said. “That only makes you duller’.”

No more was said that evening about either drugs or white rabbits.

THE MYTHS

... a precarious balance between
the forces of good and evil ...

There was no letter for Sophie the next morning. All through the interminable day at school she was bored stiff. She took care to be extra nice to Joanna during the breaks. On the way home they talked about going camping as soon as the woods were dry enough.

After what seemed an eternity she was once again at the mailbox. First she opened a letter postmarked in Mexico. It was from her father. He wrote about how much he was longing for home and how for the first time he had managed to beat the Chief Officer at chess. Apart from that he had almost finished the pile of books he had brought aboard with him after his winter leave.

And then, there it was—a brown envelope with her name on it! Leaving her schoolbag and the rest of the mail in the house, Sophie ran to the den. She pulled out the new typewritten pages and began to read:

THE MYTHOLOGICAL WORLD PICTURE

Hello there, Sophie! We have a lot to do, so we'll get started without delay.

By philosophy we mean the completely new way of thinking that evolved in Greece about six hundred years before the birth of Christ. Until that time people had found answers to all their questions in various religions. These religious explanations were handed down from generation to generation in the form of myths. A myth is a story about the gods which sets out to explain why life is as it is.

Over the millennia a wild profusion of mythological explanations of philosophical questions spread across the world. The Greek philosophers attempted to prove that these explanations

were not to be trusted.

In order to understand how the early philosophers thought, we have to understand what it was like to have a mythological picture of the world. We can take some Nordic myths as examples. (There is no need to carry coals to Newcastle.)

You have probably heard of Thor and his hammer. Before Christianity came to Norway, people believed that Thor rode across the sky in a chariot drawn by two goats. When he swung his hammer it made thunder and lightning. The word “thunder” in Norwegian—“Thordon”—means Thor’s roar. In Swedish, the word for thunder is “aska,” originally “as-aka,” which means “god’s journey” over the heavens.

When there is thunder and lightning there is also rain, which was vital to the Viking farmers. So Thor was worshipped as the god of fertility.

The mythological explanation for rain was therefore that Thor was swinging his hammer.

And when it rained the corn germinated and thrived in the fields.

How the plants of the field could grow and yield crops was not understood. But it was clearly somehow connected with the rain. And since everybody believed that the rain had something to do with Thor, he was one of the most important of the Norse gods.

There was another reason why Thor was important, a reason related to the entire world order.

The Vikings believed that the inhabited world was an island under constant threat from outside dangers. They called this part of the world Midgard, which means the kingdom in the middle. Within Midgard lay Asgard, the domain of the gods.

Outside Midgard was the kingdom of Utgard, the domain of the treacherous giants, who resorted to all kinds of cunning tricks to try and destroy the world. Evil monsters like these are often referred to as the “forces of chaos.” Not only in Norse mythology but in almost all other cultures, people found that there was a precarious balance between the forces of good and evil.

One of the ways in which the giants could destroy Midgard

was by abducting Freyja, the goddess of fertility. If they could do this, nothing would grow in the fields and the women would no longer have children. So it was vital to hold these giants in check.

Thor was a central figure in this battle with the giants. His hammer could do more than make rain; it was a key weapon in the struggle against the dangerous forces of chaos. It gave him almost unlimited power. For example, he could hurl it at the giants and slay them. And he never had to worry about losing it because it always came back to him, just like a boomerang.

This was the mythological explanation for how the balance of nature was maintained and why there was a constant struggle between good and evil. And this was precisely the kind of explanation that the philosophers rejected.

But it was not a question of explanations alone.

Mortals could not just sit idly by and wait for the gods to intervene while catastrophes such as drought or plague loomed. They had to act for themselves in the struggle against evil. This they did by performing various religious ceremonies, or rites.

The most significant religious ceremony in Norse times was the offering. Making an offering to a god had the effect of increasing that god's power. For example, mortals had to make offerings to the gods to give them the strength to conquer the forces of chaos. They could do this by sacrificing an animal to the god. The offering to Thor was usually a goat.

Offerings to Odin sometimes took the form of human sacrifices.

The myth that is best known in the Nordic countries comes from the Eddic poem "The Lay of Thrym." It tells how Thor, rising from sleep, finds that his hammer is gone. This makes him so angry that his hands tremble and his beard shakes. Accompanied by his henchman Loki he goes to Freyja to ask if Loki may borrow her wings so that he can fly to Jotunheim, the land of the giants, and find out if they are the ones who have stolen Thor's hammer.

At Jotunheim Loki meets Thrym, the king of the giants, who sure enough begins to boast that he has hidden the hammer seven leagues under the earth. And he adds that the gods will not get the

hammer back until Thrym is given Freyja as his bride.

Can you picture it, Sophie? Suddenly the good gods find themselves in the midst of a full-blown hostage incident. The giants have seized the gods' most vital defensive weapon. This is an utterly unacceptable situation. As long as the giants have Thor's hammer, they have total control over the world of gods and mortals. In exchange for the hammer they are demanding Freyja. But this is equally unacceptable. If the gods have to give up their goddess of fertility—she who protects all life—the grass will disappear from the fields and all gods and mortals will die. The situation is deadlocked.

Loki returns to Asgard, so the myth goes, and tells Freyja to put on her wedding attire for she is (alas!) to wed the king of the giants. Freyja is furious, and says people will think she is absolutely man-crazy if she agrees to marry a giant.

Then the god Heimdall has an idea. He suggests that Thor dress up as a bride. With his hair up and two stones under his tunic he will look like a woman. Understandably, Thor is not wildly enthusiastic about the idea, but he finally accepts that this is the only way he will ever get his hammer back.

So Thor allows himself to be attired in bridal costume, with Loki as his bridesmaid. To put it in present-day terms, Thor and Loki are the gods' "anti-terrorist squad."

Disguised as women, their mission is to breach the giants' stronghold and recapture Thor's hammer.

When the gods arrive at Jotunheim, the giants begin to prepare the wedding feast. But during the feast, the bride—Thor, that is—devours an entire ox and eight salmon. He also drinks three barrels of beer. This astonishes Thrym. The true identity of the "commandos" is very nearly revealed. But Loki manages to avert the danger by explaining that Freyja has been looking forward to coming to Jotunheim so much that she has not eaten for a week.

When Thrym lifts the bridal veil to kiss the bride, he is startled to find himself looking into Thor's burning eyes. Once again Loki saves the situation by explaining that the bride has not slept for a week because she is so excited about the wedding. At this, Thrym

commands that the hammer be brought forth and laid in the bride's lap during the wedding ceremony.

Thor roars with laughter when he is given the hammer. First he kills Thrym with it, and then he wipes out the giants and all their kin. And thus the gruesome hostage affair has a happy ending. Thor—the Batman or James Bond of the gods—has once again conquered the forces of evil.

So much for the myth itself, Sophie. But what is the real meaning behind it? It wasn't made up just for entertainment. The myth also tries to explain something. Here is one possible interpretation:

When a drought occurred, people sought an explanation of why there was no rain. Could it be that the giants had stolen Thor's hammer?

Perhaps the myth was an attempt to explain the changing seasons of the year: in the winter Nature dies because Thor's hammer is in jotunheim. But in the spring he succeeds in winning it back. So the myth tried to give people an explanation for something they could not understand.

But a myth was not only an explanation. People also carried out religious ceremonies related to the myths. We can imagine how people's response to drought or crop failure would be to enact a drama about the events in the myth. Perhaps a man from the village would dress up as a bride—with stones for breasts—in order to steal the hammer back from the giants. By doing this, people were taking some action to make it rain so the crops would grow in their fields.

There are a great many examples from other parts of the world of the way people dramatized their myths of the seasons in order to speed up the processes of nature.

So far we have only taken a brief glimpse at the world of Norse mythology. But there were countless myths about Thor and Odin, Freyr and Frey a, Hoder and Balder and many other gods. Mythologica notions of this kind flourished all over the world until philosophers began to tamper with them.

A mythological world picture also existed in Greece when the first philosophy was evolving. The stories of the Greek gods had

been handed down from generation to generation for centuries. In Greece the gods were called Zeus and Apollo, Hera and Athene, Dionysos and Ascle-pios, Heracles and Hephaestos, to mention only a few of them.

Around 700 B.C., much of the Greek mythology was written down by Homer and Hesiod. This created a whole new situation. Now that the myths existed in written form, it was possible to discuss them.

The earliest Greek philosophers criticized Homer's mythology because the gods resembled mortals too much and were just as egoistic and treacherous. For the first time it was said that the myths were nothing but human notions.

One exponent of this view was the philosopher Xe-nophanes, who lived from about 570

B.C. Men have created the gods in their own image, he said. They believe the gods were born and have bodies and clothes and language just as we have. Ethiopians believe that the gods are black and flat-nosed, Thracians imagine them to be blue-eyed and fair-haired. If oxen, horses, and lions could draw, they would depict gods that looked like oxen, horses, and lions!

During that period the Greeks founded many city-states, both in Greece itself and in the Greek colonies in Southern Italy and Asia Minor, where all manual work was done by slaves, leaving the citizens free to devote all their time to politics and culture.

In these city environments people began to think in a completely new way. Purely on his own behalf, any citizen could question the way society ought to be organized. Individuals could thus also ask philosophical questions without recourse to ancient myths.

We call this the development from a mythological mode of thought to one based on experience and reason. The aim of the early Greek philosophers was to find natural, rather than supernatural, explanations for natural processes.

Sophie left the den and wandered about in the large garden. She tried to forget what she had learned at school, especially in science classes.

If she had grown up in this garden without knowing anything at all about nature, how would she feel about the spring?

Would she try to invent some kind of explanation for why it suddenly started to rain one day?

Would she work out some fantasy to explain where the snow went and why the sun rose in the morning?

Yes, she definitely would. She began to make up a story:

Winter held the land in its icy grip because the evil Muriat had imprisoned the beautiful Princess Sikita in a cold prison. But one morning the brave Prince Bravato came and rescued her. Sikita was so happy that she began to dance over the meadows, singing a song she had composed inside the dank prison. The earth and the trees were so moved that all the snow turned into tears. But then the sun came out and dried all the tears away. The birds imitated Sikita's song, and when the beautiful princess let down her golden tresses, a few locks of her hair fell onto the earth and turned into the lilies of the field ...

Sophie liked her beautiful story. If she had not known any other explanation for the changing seasons, she felt sure she would have come to believe her own story in the end.

She understood that people had always felt a need to explain the processes of nature. Perhaps they could not live without such explanations. And that they made up all those myths in the time before there was anything called science.

THE NATURAL PHILOSOPHERS

... nothing can come from nothing ...

When her mother got home from work that afternoon Sophie was sitting in the glider, pondering the possible connection between the philosophy course and Hilde Moller Knag, who would not be getting a birthday card from her father.

Her mother called from the other end of the garden, "Sophie! There's a letter for you!"

She caught her breath. She had already emptied the mailbox, so the letter had to be from the philosopher. What on earth would she say to her mother?

"There's no stamp on it. It's probably a love letter!" Sophie took the letter.

"Aren't you going to open it?" She had to find an excuse.

"Have you ever heard of anyone opening a love letter with her mother looking over her shoulder?"

Let her mother think it was a love letter. Although it was embarrassing enough, it would be even worse if her mother found out that she was doing a correspondence course with a complete stranger, a philosopher who was playing hide-and-seek with her.

It was one of the little white envelopes. When Sophie got upstairs to her room, she found three new questions:

Is there a basic substance that everything else is made of?

Can water turn into wine?

How can earth and water produce a live frog!

Sophie found the questions pretty stupid, but nevertheless they kept buzzing around in her head all evening. She was still thinking about them at school the next day, examining them one by one.

Could there be a "basic substance" that everything was made of? If there was some such substance, how could it suddenly turn into a flower or an elephant?

The same objection applied to the question of whether water could turn into wine. Sophie knew the parable of how Jesus turned water into wine, but she had never taken it literally. And if Jesus really had turned water into wine, it was because it was a miracle, something that could not be done normally. Sophie knew there was a lot of water, not only in wine but in all other growing things. But even if a cucumber was 95 percent water, there must be something else in it as well, because a cucumber was a cucumber, not water.

And then there was the question about the frog. Her philosophy teacher had this really weird thing about frogs.

Sophie could possibly accept that a frog consisted of earth and water, in which case the earth must consist of more than one kind of substance. If the earth consisted of a lot of different substances, it was obviously possible that earth and water together could produce a frog. That is, if the earth and the water went via frog spawn and tadpoles. Because a frog could not just grow out of a cabbage patch, however much you watered it.

When she got home from school that day there was a fat envelope waiting for her in the mailbox.

Sophie hid in the den just as she had done the other days.

THE PHILOSOPHERS' PROJECT

Here we are again! We'll go directly to today's lesson without detours around white rabbits and the like.

I'll outline very broadly the way people have thought about philosophy, from the ancient Greeks right up to our own day. But we'll take things in their correct order.

Since some philosophers lived in a different age—and perhaps in a completely different culture from ours—it is a good idea to try and see what each philosopher's project is. By this I mean that we must try to grasp precisely what it is that each particular philosopher is especially concerned with finding out. One philosopher might want to know how plants and animals came into being. Another might want to know whether there is a God or whether man has an immortal soul.

Once we have determined what a particular philosopher's project is, it is easier to follow his line of thought, since no one philosopher concerns himself with the whole of philosophy.

I said his line of thought—referring to the philosopher, because this is also a story of men. Women of the past were subjugated both as females and as thinking beings, which is sad because a great deal of very important experience was lost as a result. It was not until this century that women really made their mark on the history of philosophy.

I do not intend to give you any homework—no difficult math questions, or anything like that, and conjugating English verbs is outside my sphere of interest. However, from time to time I'll give you a short assignment.

If you accept these conditions, we'll begin.

THE NATURAL PHILOSOPHERS

The earliest Greek philosophers are sometimes called natural philosophers because they were mainly concerned with the natural world and its processes.

We have already asked ourselves where everything comes from. Nowadays a lot of people imagine that at some time something must have come from nothing. This idea was not so widespread among the Greeks. For one reason or another, they assumed that "something" had always existed.

How everything could come from nothing was therefore not the all-important question. On the other hand the Greeks marveled at how live fish could come from water, and huge trees and brilliantly colored flowers could come from the dead earth. Not to mention how a baby could come from its mother's womb!

The philosophers observed with their own eyes that nature was in a constant state of transformation. But how could such transformations occur?

How could something change from being substance to being a living thing, for example?

All the earliest philosophers shared the belief that there had to be a certain basic substance at the root of all change. How they arrived at this idea is hard to say. We only know that the notion gradually evolved that there must be a basic substance that was the hidden cause of all changes in nature. There had to be “something” that all things came from and returned to.

For us, the most interesting part is actually not what solutions these earliest philosophers arrived at, but which questions they asked and what type of answer they were looking for. We are more interested in how they thought than in exactly what they thought.

We know that they posed questions relating to the transformations they could observe in the physical world. They were looking for the underlying laws of nature. They wanted to understand what was happening around them without having to turn to the ancient myths. And most important, they wanted to understand the actual processes by studying nature itself. This was quite different from explaining thunder and lightning or winter and spring by telling stories about the gods.

So philosophy gradually liberated itself from religion. We could say that the natural philosophers took the first step in the direction of scientific reasoning, thereby becoming the precursors of what was to become science.

Only fragments have survived of what the natural philosophers said and wrote. What little we know is found in the writings of Aristotle, who lived two centuries later. He refers only to the conclusions the philosophers reached. So we do not always know by what paths they reached these conclusions. But what we do know enables us to establish that the earliest Greek philosophers’ project concerned the question of a basic constituent substance and the changes in nature.

THREE PHILOSOPHERS FROM MILETUS

The first philosopher we know of is Thales, who came from Miletus, a Greek colony in Asia Minor. He traveled in many countries, including Egypt, where he is said to have calculated the height of a pyramid by measuring its shadow at the precise moment when the

length of his own shadow was equal to his height. He is also said to have accurately predicted a solar eclipse in the year 585 B.C.

Thales thought that the source of all things was water. We do not know exactly what he meant by that, he may have believed that all life originated from water—and that all life returns to water again when it dissolves.

During his travels in Egypt he must have observed how the crops began to grow as soon as the floods of the Nile receded from the land areas in the Nile Delta. Perhaps he also noticed that frogs and worms appeared wherever it had just been raining.

It is likely that Thales thought about the way water turns to ice or vapor—and then turns back into water again.

Thales is also supposed to have said that “all things are full of gods.” What he meant by that we can only surmise. Perhaps, seeing how the black earth was the source of everything from flowers and crops to insects and cockroaches, he imagined that the earth was filled with tiny invisible “life-germs.” One thing is certain—he was not talking about Homer’s gods.

The next philosopher we hear of is Anaximander, who also lived in Miletus at about the same time as Thales. He thought that our world was only one of a myriad of worlds that evolve and dissolve in something he called the boundless. It is not so easy to explain what he meant by the boundless, but it seems clear that he was not thinking of a known substance in the way that Thales had envisaged. Perhaps he meant that the substance which is the source of all things had to be something other than the things created. Because all created things are limited, that which comes before and after them must be “boundless.” It is clear that this basic stuff could not be anything as ordinary as water.

A third philosopher from Miletus was Anaximenes (c. 570—526 B.C.). He thought that the source of all things must be “air” or “vapor.” Anaximenes was of course familiar with Thales’ theory of water. But where does water come from? Anaximenes thought that water was condensed air. We observe that when it rains, water is pressed from the air. When water is pressed even more, it becomes earth, he thought. He may have seen how earth and sand were pressed out of melting ice. He also thought that fire was rarefied air.

According to Anaximenes, air was therefore the origin of earth, water, and fire.

It is not a far cry from water to the fruit of the earth. Perhaps Anaximenes thought that earth, air, and fire were all necessary to the creation of life, but that the source of all things was air or vapor. So, like Thales, he thought that there must be an underlying substance that is the source of all natural change.

Nothing Can Come from Nothing

These three Milesian philosophers all believed in the existence of a single basic substance as the source of all things. But how could one substance suddenly change into something else? We can call this the problem of change.

From about 500 B.C., there was a group of philosophers in the Greek colony of Elea in Southern Italy. These “Eleatics” were interested in this question.

The most important of these philosophers was Parmenides (c. 540-480 B.C.).

Parmenides thought that everything that exists had always existed. This idea was not alien to the Greeks. They took it more or less for granted that everything that existed in the world was everlasting. Nothing can come out of nothing, thought Parmenides. And nothing that exists can become nothing.

But Parmenides took the idea further. He thought that there was no such thing as actual change. Nothing could become anything other than it was.

Parmenides realized, of course, that nature is in a constant state of flux. He perceived with his senses that things changed. But he could not equate this with what his reason told him. When forced to choose between relying either on his senses or his reason, he chose reason.

You know the expression “I’ll believe it when I see it.” But Parmenides didn’t even believe things when he saw them. He believed that our senses give us an incorrect picture of the world, a picture that does not tally with our reason. As a philosopher, he saw it as his task to expose all forms of perceptual illusion.

This unshakable faith in human reason is called rationalism. A rationalist is someone who believes that human reason is the primary source of our knowledge of the world.

All Things Flow

A contemporary of Parmenides was Heraclitus (c. 540-480 B.C.), who was from Ephesus in Asia Minor. He thought that constant change, or flow, was in fact the most basic characteristic of nature. We could perhaps say that Heraclitus had more faith in what he could perceive than Parmenides did.

“Everything flows,” said Heraclitus. Everything is in constant flux and movement, nothing is abiding. Therefore we “cannot step twice into the same river.” When I step into the river for the second time, neither I nor the river are the same.

Heraclitus pointed out that the world is characterized by opposites. If we were never ill, we would not know what it was to be well. If we never knew hunger, we would take no pleasure in being full. If there were never any war, we would not appreciate peace. And if there were no winter, we would never see the spring.

Both good and bad have their inevitable place in the order of things, Heraclitus believed.

Without this constant interplay of opposites the world would cease to exist.

“God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, hunger and satiety,” he said.

He used the term “God,” but he was clearly not referring to the gods of the mythology. To Heraclitus, God—or the Deity—was something that embraced the whole world. Indeed, God can be seen most clearly in the constant transformations and contrasts of nature.

Instead of the term “God,” Heraclitus often used the Greek word *logos*, meaning reason. Although we humans do not always think alike or have the same degree of reason, Heraclitus believed that there must be a kind of “universal reason” guiding everything that happens in nature.

This “universal reason” or “universal law” is something common to us all, and something that everybody is guided by. And

yet most people live by their individual reason, thought Heraclitus. In general, he despised his fellow beings. “The opinions of most people,” he said, “are like the playthings of infants.”

So in the midst of all nature’s constant flux and opposites, Heraclitus saw an Entity or one-ness. This “something,” which was the source of everything, he called God or logos.

Four Basic Elements

In one way, Parmenides and Heraclitus were the direct opposite of each other.

Parmenides’ reason made it clear that nothing could change. Heraclitus’ sense perceptions made it equally clear that nature was in a constant state of change. Which of them was right? Should we let reason dictate or should we rely on our senses?

Parmenides and Heraclitus both say two things: Parmenides says:

- a. that nothing can change, and
- b. that our sensory perceptions must therefore be unreliable.

Heraclitus, on the other hand, says:

- a. that everything changes (“all things flow”), and
- b. that our sensory perceptions are reliable.

Philosophers could hardly disagree more than that! But who was right? It fell to Empedocles (c. 490-430 B.C.) from Sicily to lead the way out of the tangle they had gotten themselves into.

He thought they were both right in one of their assertions but wrong in the other.

Empedocles found that the cause of their basic disagreement was that both philosophers had assumed the presence of only one element. If this were true, the gap between what reason dictates and what “we can see with our own eyes” would be unbridgeable.

Water obviously cannot turn into a fish or a butterfly. In fact, water cannot change. Pure water will continue to be pure water. So Parmenides was right in holding that “nothing changes.”

But at the same time Empedocles agreed with Heraclitus that we must trust the evidence of our senses. We must believe what we

see, and what we see is precisely that nature changes.

Empedocles concluded that it was the idea of a single basic substance that had to be rejected. Neither water nor air alone can change into a rosebush or a butterfly. The source of nature cannot possibly be one single “element.”

Empedocles believed that all in all, nature consisted of four elements, or “roots” as he termed them. These four roots were earth, air, fire, and water.

All natural processes were due to the coming together and separating of these four elements. For all things were a mixture of earth, air, fire, and water, but in varying proportions. When a flower or an animal dies, he said, the four elements separate again. We can register these changes with the naked eye. But earth and air, fire and water remain everlasting, “untouched” by all the compounds of which they are part. So it is not correct to say that “everything” changes. Basically, nothing changes. What happens is that the four elements are combined and separated—only to be combined again.

We can make a comparison to painting. If a painter only has one color—red, for instance—he cannot paint green trees. But if he has yellow, red, blue, and black, he can paint in hundreds of different colors because he can mix them in varying proportions.

An example from the kitchen illustrates the same thing. If I only have flour, I have to be a wizard to bake a cake. But if I have eggs, flour, milk, and sugar, then I can make any number of different cakes.

It was not purely by chance that Empedocles chose earth, air, fire, and water as nature’s “roots.” Other philosophers before him had tried to show that the primordial substance had to be either water, air, or fire. Thales and Anaximenes

had pointed out that both water and air were essential elements in the physical world. The Greeks believed that fire was also essential. They observed, for example, the importance of the sun to all living things, and they also knew that both animals and humans have body heat.

Empedocles might have watched a piece of wood burning. Something disintegrates. We hear it crackle and splutter. That is “water.” Something goes up in smoke. That is “air.” The “fire” we can see. Something also remains when the fire is extinguished. That is the ashes—or “earth.”

After Empedocles’ clarification of nature’s transformations as the combination and dissolution of the four “roots,” something still remained to be explained. What makes these elements combine so that new life can occur? And what makes the “mixture” of, say, a flower dissolve again?

Empedocles believed that there were two different forces at work in nature. He called them love and strife. Love binds things together, and strife separates them.

He distinguishes between “substance” and “force.” This is worth noting. Even today, scientists distinguish between elements and natural forces. Modern science holds that all natural processes can be explained as the interaction between different elements and various natural forces.

Empedocles also raised the question of what happens when we perceive something.

How can I “see” a flower, for example? What is it that happens? Have you ever thought about it, Sophie?

Empedocles believed that the eyes consist of earth, air, fire, and water, just like everything else in nature. So the “earth” in my eye perceives what is of the earth in my surroundings, the “air” perceives what is of the air, the “fire” perceives what is of fire, and the “water” what is of water. Had my eyes lacked any of the four substances, I would not have seen all of nature.

Something of Everything in Everything

Anaxagoras (500-428 B.C.) was another philosopher who could not

agree that one particular basic substance—water, for instance—might be transformed into everything we see in the natural world. Nor could he accept that earth, air, fire, and water can be transformed into blood and bone.

Anaxagoras held that nature is built up of an infinite number of minute particles invisible to the eye. Moreover, everything can be divided into even smaller parts, but even in the minutest parts there are fragments of all other things. If skin and bone are not a transformation of something else, there must also be skin and bone, he thought, in the milk we drink and the food we eat. ~~

A couple of present-day examples can perhaps illustrate Anaxagoras' line of thinking.

Modern laser technology can produce so-called holograms. If one of these holograms depicts a car, for example, and the hologram is fragmented, we will see a picture of the whole car even though we only have the part of the hologram that showed the bumper. This is because the whole subject is present in every tiny part.

In a sense, our bodies are built up in the same way. If I loosen a skin cell from my finger, the nucleus will contain not only the characteristics of my skin: the same cell will also reveal what kind of eyes I have, the color of my hair, the number and type of my fingers, and so on. Every cell of the human body carries a blueprint of the way all the other cells are constructed. So there is “something of everything” in every single cell. The whole exists in each tiny part.

Anaxagoras called these minuscule particles which have something of everything in them seeds.

Remember that Empedocles thought that it was “love” that joined the elements together in whole bodies. Anaxagoras also imagined “order” as a kind of force, creating animals and humans, flowers and trees. He called this force mind or intelligence (nous).

Anaxagoras is also interesting because he was the first philosopher we hear of in Athens.

He was from Asia Minor but he moved to Athens at the age of forty. He was later accused of atheism and was ultimately forced to leave the city. Among other things, he said that the sun was not a god but a red-hot stone, bigger than the entire Peloponnesian

peninsula.

Anaxagoras was generally very interested in astronomy. He believed that all heavenly bodies were made of the same substance as Earth. He reached this conclusion after studying a meteorite. This gave him the idea that there could be human life on other planets. He also pointed out that the Moon has no light of its own—its light comes from Earth, he said. He thought up an explanation for solar eclipses as well.

P.S. Thank you for your attention, Sophie. It is not unlikely that you will need to read this chapter two or three times before you understand it all. But understanding will always require some effort. You probably wouldn't admire a friend who was good at everything if it cost her no effort.

The best solution to the question of basic substance and the transformations in nature must wait until tomorrow, when you will meet Democritus. I'll say no more!

Sophie sat in the den looking out into the garden through a little hole in the dense thicket. She had to try and sort out her thoughts after all she had read.

It was as clear as daylight that plain water could never turn into anything other than ice or steam.

Water couldn't even turn into a watermelon, because even watermelons consisted of more than just water. But she was only sure of that because that's what she had learned. Would she be absolutely certain, for example, that ice was only water if that wasn't what she had learned? At least, she would have to have studied very closely how water froze to ice and melted again.

Sophie tried once again to use her own common sense, and not to think about what she had learned from others.

Parmenides had refused to accept the idea of change in any form. And the more she thought about it, the more she was convinced that, in a way, he had been right. His intelligence could not accept that "something" could suddenly transform itself into "something completely different." It must have taken quite a bit of courage to come right out and say it, because it meant denying all the natural changes that people could see for themselves. Lots of

people must have laughed at him.

And Empedocles must have been pretty smart too, when he proved that the world had to consist of more than one single substance. That made all the transformations of nature possible without anything actually changing.

The old Greek philosopher had found that out just by reasoning. Of course he had studied nature, but he didn't have the equipment to do chemical analysis the way scientists do nowadays.

Sophie was not sure whether she really believed that the source of everything actually was earth, air, fire, and water. But after all, what did that matter? In principle, Empedocles was right. The only way we can accept the transformations we can see with our own eyes—without losing our reason—is to admit the existence of more than one single basic substance.

Sophie found philosophy doubly exciting because she was able to follow all the ideas by using her own common sense—without having to remember everything she had learned at school. She decided that philosophy was not something you can learn; but perhaps you can learn to think philosophically.

Democritus

...the most ingenious toy in the world...

Sophie put all the typed pages from the unknown philosopher back into the cookie tin and put the lid on it. She crawled out of the den and stood for a while looking across the garden. She thought about what happened yesterday. Her mother had teased her about the “love letter” again at breakfast this morning. She walked quickly over to the mailbox to prevent the same thing from happening today.

Getting a love letter two days in a row would be doubly embarrassing.

There was another little white envelope! Sophie began to discern a pattern in the deliveries: every afternoon she would find a big brown envelope. While she read the contents, the philosopher would sneak up to the mailbox with another little white envelope.

So now Sophie would be able to find out who he was. If it was a he! She had a good view of the mailbox from her room. If she stood at the window she would see the mysterious philosopher. White envelopes don’t just appear out of thin air!

Sophie decided to keep a careful watch the following day. Tomorrow was Friday and she would have the whole weekend ahead of her.

She went up to her room and opened the envelope. There was only one question today, but it was even dumber than the previous three:

Why is Lego the most ingenious toy in the world?

For a start, Sophie was not at all sure she agreed that it was. It was years since she had played with the little plastic blocks. Moreover she could not for the life of her see what Lego could possibly have to do with philosophy.

But she was a dutiful student. Rummaging on the top shelf of her closet, she found a bag full of Lego blocks of all shapes and sizes.

For the first time in ages she began to build with them. As she worked, some ideas began to occur to her about the blocks.

They are easy to assemble, she thought. Even though they are all different, they all fit together.

They are also unbreakable. She couldn't ever remember having seen a broken Lego block. All her blocks looked as bright and new as the day they were bought, many years ago. The best thing about them was that with Lego she could construct any kind of object. And then she could separate the blocks and construct something new.

What more could one ask of a toy? Sophie decided that Lego really could be called the most ingenious toy in the world. But what it had to do with philosophy was beyond her.

She had nearly finished constructing a big doll's house. Much as she hated to admit it, she hadn't had as much fun in ages.

Why did people quit playing when they grew up?

When her mother got home and saw what Sophie had been doing, she blurted out, "What fun! I'm so glad you're not too grown up to play!"

"I'm not playing!" Sophie retorted indignantly, "I'm doing a very complicated philosophical experiment!"

Her mother sighed deeply. She was probably thinking about the white rabbit and the top hat.

When Sophie got home from school the following day, there were several more pages for her in a big brown envelope. She took them upstairs to her room. She could not wait to read them, but she had to keep her eye on the mailbox at the same time.

THE ATOM THEORY

Here I am again, Sophie. Today you are going to hear about the last of the great natural philosophers. His name is Democritus (c. 460-370 B.C.) and he was from the little town of Abdera on the northern Aegean coast.

If you were able to answer the question about Lego blocks without difficulty, you should have no problem understanding what this philosopher's project was.

Democritus agreed with his predecessors that transformations in nature could not be due to the fact that anything actually "changed." He therefore assumed that everything was built up of

tiny invisible blocks, each of which was eternal and immutable. Democritus called these smallest units atoms.

The word “a-tom” means “un-cuttable.” For Democritus it was all-important to establish that the constituent parts that everything else was composed of could not be divided indefinitely into smaller parts. If this were possible, they could not be used as blocks. If atoms could eternally be broken down into ever smaller parts, nature would begin to dissolve like constantly diluted soup.

Moreover, nature’s blocks had to be eternal—because nothing can come from nothing. In this, he agreed with Parmenides and the Eleatics. Also, he believed that all atoms were firm and solid. But they could not all be the same. If all atoms were identical, there would still be no satisfactory explanation of how they could combine to form everything from poppies and olive trees to goatskin and human hair.

Democritus believed that nature consisted of an unlimited number and variety of atoms. Some were round and smooth, others were irregular and jagged. And precisely because they were so different they could join together into all kinds of different bodies. But however infinite they might be in number and shape, they were all eternal, immutable, and indivisible.

When a body—a tree or an animal, for instance—died and disintegrated, the atoms dispersed and could be used again in new bodies. Atoms moved around in space, but because they had “hooks” and “barbs,” they could join together to form all the things we see around us.

So now you see what I meant about Lego blocks. They have more or less the same properties as those which Democritus ascribed to atoms. And that is what makes them so much fun to build with. They are first and foremost indivisible. Then they have different shapes and sizes. They are solid and impermeable. They also have “hooks” and “barbs” so that they can be connected to form every conceivable figure. These connections can later be broken again so that new figures can be constructed from the same blocks.

The fact that they can be used over and over is what has made Lego so popular. Each single Lego block can be part of a truck one day and part of a castle the day after. We could also say that lego

blocks are “eternal.” Children of today can play with the same blocks their parents played with when they were little.

We can form things out of clay too, but clay cannot be used over and over, because it can be broken up into smaller and smaller pieces. These tiny pieces can never be joined together again to make something else.

Today we can establish that Democritus’ atom theory was more or less correct. Nature really is built up of different “atoms” that join and separate again. A hydrogen atom in a cell at the end of my nose was once part of an elephant’s trunk. A carbon atom in my cardiac muscle was once in the tail of a dinosaur.

In our own time, however, scientists have discovered that atoms can be broken into smaller “elemental particles.” We call these elemental particles protons, neutrons, and electrons. These will possibly someday be broken into even lesser particles. But physicists agree that somewhere along the line there has to be a limit. There has to be a “minimal part” of which nature consists.

Democritus did not have access to modern electronic apparatus. His only proper equipment was his mind. But reason left him no real choice. Once it is accepted that nothing can change, that nothing can come out of nothing, and that nothing is ever lost, then nature must consist of infinitesimal blocks that can join and separate again.

Democritus did not believe in any “force” or “soul” that could intervene in natural processes. The only things that existed, he believed, were atoms and the void. Since he believed in nothing but material things, we call him a materialist.

According to Democritus, there is no conscious “design” in the movement of atoms. In nature, everything happens quite mechanically. This does not mean that everything happens randomly, for everything obeys the inevitable laws of necessity. Everything that happens has a natural cause, a cause that is inherent in the thing itself. Democritus once said that he would rather discover a new cause of nature than be the King of Persia.

The atom theory also explains our sense perception, thought Democritus. When we sense something, it is due to the movement of atoms in space. When I see the moon, it is because “moon atoms” penetrate my eye.

But what about the “soul,” then? Surely that could not consist of atoms, of material things? Indeed it could. Democritus believed that the soul was made up of special round, smooth “soul atoms.” When a human being died, the soul atoms flew in all directions, and could then become part of a new soul formation.

This meant that human beings had no immortal soul, another belief that many people share today. They believe, like Democritus, that “soul” is connected with brain, and that we cannot have any form of consciousness once the brain disintegrates.

Democritus’s atom theory marked the end of Greek natural philosophy for the time being. He agreed with Heraclitus that everything in nature “flowed,” since forms come and go. But behind everything that flowed there were some eternal and immutable things that did not flow. Democritus called them atoms.

During her reading Sophie glanced out of the window several times to see whether her mysterious correspondent had turned up at the mailbox. Now she just sat staring down the road, thinking about what she had read. She felt that Democritus’s ideas had been so simple and yet so ingenious. He had discovered the real solution to the problem of “basic substance” and “transformation.” This problem had been so complicated that philosophers had gone around puzzling over it for generations. And in the end Democritus had solved it on his own by using his common sense.

Sophie could hardly help smiling. It had to be true that nature was built up of small parts that never changed. At the same time Heraclitus was obviously right in thinking that all forms in nature “flow.” Because everybody dies, animals die, even a mountain range slowly disintegrates. The point was that the mountain range is made up of tiny indivisible parts that never break up.

At the same time Democritus had raised some new questions. For example, he had said that everything happened mechanically. He did not accept that there was any spiritual force in life—unlike Empedocles and Anaxagoras. Democritus also believed that man had no immortal soul.

Could she be sure of that?

She didn’t know. But then she had only just begun the philosophy course.

FATE

...the “fortune-teller” is trying to foresee something that is really quite unforeseeable ...

Sophie had been keeping her eye on the mailbox while she read about Democritus. But just in case, she decided nevertheless to take a stroll down to the garden gate.

When she opened the front door she saw a small envelope on the front step. And sure enough—it was addressed to Sophie Amundsen.

So he had tricked her! Today of all days, when she had kept such careful watch on the mailbox, the mystery man had sneaked up to the house from a different angle and just laid the letter on the step before making off into the woods again. Drat!

How did he know that Sophie was watching the mailbox today? Had he seen her at the window?

Anyway, she was glad to find the letter before her mother arrived.

Sophie went back to her room and opened the letter. The white envelope was a bit wet around the edges, and had two little holes in it. Why was that? It had not rained for several days.

The little note inside read:

Do you believe in Fate?

Is sickness the punishment of the gods? What forces govern the course of history?

Did she believe in Fate? She was not at all sure. But she knew a lot of people who did. There was a girl in her class who read horoscopes in magazines. But if they believed in astrology, they probably believed in Fate as well, because astrologers claimed that the position of the stars influenced people’s lives on Earth.

If you believed that a black cat crossing your path meant bad luck—well, then you believed in Fate, didn’t you? As she thought about it, several more examples of fatalism occurred to her. Why do

so many people knock on wood, for example? And why was Friday the thirteenth an unlucky day? Sophie had heard that lots of hotels had no room number 13. It had to be because so many people were superstitious.

“Superstitious.” What a strange word. If you believed in Christianity or Islam, it was called “faith.” But if you believed in astrology or Friday the thirteenth it was superstition! Who had the right to call other people’s belief superstition?

Sophie was sure of one thing, though. Democritus had not believed in fate. He was a materialist.

He had only believed in atoms and empty space.

Sophie tried to think about the other questions on the note.

“Is sickness the punishment of the gods?” Surely nobody believed that nowadays? But it occurred to her that many people thought it helped to pray for recovery, so at any rate they must believe that God had some power over people’s health.

The last question was harder to answer. Sophie had never given much thought to what governed the course of history. It had to be people, surely? If it was God or Fate, people had no free will.

The idea of free will made Sophie think of something else. Why should she put up with this mysterious philosopher playing cat and mouse with her? Why couldn’t she write a letter to him. He (or she) would quite probably put another big envelope in the mailbox during the night or sometime tomorrow morning. She would see to it that there was a letter ready for this person.

Sophie began right away. It was difficult to write to someone she had never seen. She didn’t even know if it was a man or a woman. Or if he or she was old or young. For that matter, the mysterious philosopher could even be someone she already knew. She wrote:

Most respected philosopher, Your generous correspondence course in philosophy is greatly appreciated by us here. But it bothers us not to know who you are. We therefore request you to use your full name. In return we would like to extend our hospitality should you care to come and have coffee with us, but preferably when my mother is at home. She is at work from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day from Monday to Friday. I am at school during these days, but I am

always home by 2:15 p.m., except on Thursdays. I am also very good at making coffee.

Thanking you in advance, I remain
Your attentive student,
Sophie Amundsen (aged 14)

At the bottom of the page she wrote RSVP.

Sophie felt that the letter had turned out much too formal. But it was hard to know which words to choose when writing to a person without a face. She put the letter in a pink envelope and addressed it “To the philosopher.”

The problem was where to put it so her mother didn’t find it. She would have to wait for her to get home before putting it in the mailbox. And she would also have to remember to look in the mailbox early the next morning before the newspaper arrived. If no new letter came for her this evening or during the night, she would have to take the pink envelope in again.

Why did it all have to be so complicated?

That evening Sophie went up to her room early, even though it was Friday. Her mother tried to tempt her with pizza and a thriller on TV, but Sophie said she was tired and wanted to go to bed and read. While her mother sat watching TV, she sneaked out to the mailbox with her letter.

Her mother was clearly worried. She had started speaking to Sophie in a different tone since the business with the white rabbit and the top hat. Sophie hated to be a worry to her mother, but she just had to go upstairs and keep an eye on the mailbox.

When her mother came up at about eleven o’clock, Sophie was sitting at the window staring down the road.

“You’re not still sitting there staring at the mailbox!” she said. “I can look at whatever I like.”

“I really think you must be in love, Sophie. But if he is going to bring you another letter, he certainly won’t come in the middle of the night.”

Yuck! Sophie loathed all that soppy talk about love. But she had to let her mother go on believing it was true.

“Is he the one who told you about the rabbit and the top hat?” her mother asked. Sophie nodded.

“He—he doesn’t do drugs, does he?”

Now Sophie felt really sorry for her mother. She couldn’t go on letting her worry this way, although it was completely nutty of her to think that just because someone had a slightly bizarre idea he must be on something. Grownups really were idiotic sometimes.

She said, “Mom, I promise you once and for all I’ll never do any of that stuff... and he doesn’t either. But he is very interested in philosophy.”

“Is he older than you?” Sophie shook her head. “The same age?” Sophie nodded.

“Well, I’m sure he’s very sweet, darling. Now I think you should try and get some sleep.”

But Sophie stayed sitting by the window for what seemed like hours. At last she could hardly keep her eyes open. It was one o’clock.

She was just about to go to bed when she suddenly caught sight of a shadow emerging from the woods.

Although it was almost dark outside, she could make out the shape of a human figure. It was a man, and Sophie thought he looked quite old. He was certainly not her age! He was wearing a beret of some kind.

She could have sworn he glanced up at the house, but Sophie’s light was not on. The man went straight up to the mailbox and dropped a big envelope into it. As he let go of it, he caught sight of Sophie’s letter. He reached down into the mailbox and fished it up. The next minute he was walking swiftly back toward the woods. He hurried down the woodland path and was gone.

Sophie felt her heart pounding. Her first instinct was to run after him in her pajamas but she didn’t dare run after a stranger in the middle of the night. But she did have to go out and fetch the envelope.

After a minute or two she crept down the stairs, opened the front door quietly, and ran to the mailbox. In a flash she was back in her room with the envelope in her hand. She sat on her bed, holding her breath. After a few minutes had passed and all was still quiet in

the house, she opened the letter and began to read.

She knew this would not be an answer to her own letter. That could not arrive until tomorrow.

FATE

Good morning once again, my dear Sophie. In case you should get any ideas, let me make it quite clear that you must never attempt to check up on me. One day we will meet, but I shall be the one to decide when and where. And that's final. You are not going to disobey me, are you?

But to return to the philosophers. We have seen how they tried to find natural explanations for the transformations in Nature. Previously these things had been explained through myths.

Old superstitions had to be cleared away in other areas as well. We see them at work in matters of sickness and health as well as in political events. In both these areas the Greeks were great believers in fatalism.

Fatalism is the belief that whatever happens is predestined. We find this belief all over the world, not only throughout history but in our own day as well. Here in the Nordic countries we find a strong belief in "lagnadan," or fate, in the old Icelandic sagas of the *Edda*.

We also find the belief, both in Ancient Greece and in other parts of the world, that people could learn their fate from some form of oracle. In other words, that the fate of a person or a country could be foreseen in various ways.

There are still a lot of people who believe that they can tell your fortune in the cards, read your palm, or predict your future in the stars.

A special Norwegian version of this is telling your fortune in coffee cups. When a coffee cup is empty there are usually some traces of coffee grounds left. These might form a certain image or pattern—at least, if we give our imagination free rein. If the grounds resemble a car, it might mean that the person who drank from the cup is going for a long drive.

Thus the "fortune-teller" is trying to foresee something that is really quite unforeseeable. This is characteristic of all forms of

foreseeing. And precisely because what they “see” is so vague, it is hard to repudiate fortune-tellers’ claims.

When we gaze up at the stars, we see a veritable chaos of twinkling dots. Nevertheless, throughout the ages there have always been people who believed that the stars could tell us something about our life on Earth. Even today there are political leaders who seek the advice of astrologers before they make any important decisions.

The Oracle at Delphi

The ancient Greeks believed that they could consult the famous oracle at Delphi about their fate. Apollo, the god of the oracle, spoke through his priestess Pythia, who sat on a stool over a fissure in the earth, from which arose hypnotic vapors that put Pythia in a trance. This enabled her to be Apollo’s mouthpiece. When people came to Delphi they had to present their question to the priests of the oracle, who passed it on to Pythia. Her answer would be so obscure or ambiguous that the priests would have to interpret it. In that way, the people got the benefit of Apollo’s wisdom, believing that he knew everything, even about the future.

There were many heads of state who dared not go to war or take other decisive steps until they had consulted the oracle at Delphi. The priests of Apollo thus functioned more or less as diplomats, or advisers. They were experts with an intimate knowledge of the people and the country.

Over the entrance to the temple at Delphi was a famous inscription: KNOW THYSELF! It reminded visitors that man must never believe himself to be more than mortal—and that no man can escape his destiny.

The Greeks had many stories of people whose destiny catches up with them. As time went by, a number of plays—tragedies—were written about these “tragic” people. The most famous one is the tragedy of King Oedipus.

History and Medicine

But Fate did not just govern the lives of individuals. The Greeks

believed that even world history was governed by Fate, and that the fortunes of war could be swayed by the intervention of the gods. Today there are still many people who believe that God or some other mysterious power is steering the course of history.

But at the same time as Greek philosophers were trying to find natural explanations for the processes of nature, the first historians were beginning to search for natural explanations for the course of history. When a country lost a war, the vengeance of the gods was no longer an acceptable explanation to them. The best known Greek historians were Herodotus (484- 424 B.C.) and Thucydides (460-400 B.C.).

The Greeks also believed that sickness could be ascribed to divine intervention. On the other hand, the gods could make people well again if they made the appropriate sacrifices.

This idea was in no way unique to the Greeks. Before the development of modern medicine, the most widely accepted view was that sickness was due to supernatural causes. The word “influenza” actually means a malign influence from the stars.

Even today, there are a lot of people who believe that some diseases—AIDS, for example—are God’s punishment. Many also believe that sick people can be cured with the help of the supernatural.

Concurrently with the new directions in Greek philosophy, a Greek medical science arose which tried to find natural explanations for sickness and health. The founder of Greek medicine is said to have been Hippocrates, who was born on the island of Cos around 460 B.C.

The most essential safeguards against sickness, according to the Hippocratic medical tradition, were moderation and a healthy lifestyle. Health is the natural condition. When sickness occurs, it is a sign that Nature has gone off course because of physical or mental imbalance. The road to health for everyone is through moderation, harmony, and a “sound mind in a sound body.”

There is a lot of talk today about “medical ethics,” which is another way of saying that a doctor must practice medicine according to certain ethical rules. For instance, a doctor may not give healthy people a prescription for narcotics. A doctor must also

maintain professional secrecy, which means that he is not allowed to reveal anything a patient has told him about his illness. These ideas go back to Hippocrates. He required his pupils to take the following oath:

I will follow that system or regimen which, according to my ability and judgment, I consider to be for the benefit of my patients, and abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous. I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked nor suggest any such counsel, and in like manner I will not give to a woman the means to produce an abortion. Whenever I go into a house, I will go for the benefit of the sick and will abstain from every voluntary act of mischief and corruption, and further, from the seduction of females or males, whether freemen or slaves. Whatever, in connection with my professional practice, I see or hear which ought not to be spoken abroad, I will keep secret. So long as I continue to carry out this oath unviolated, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and the practice of the art, respected by all men in all times, but should I violate this oath, may the reverse be my lot.

Sophie awoke with a start on Saturday morning. Was it a dream or had she really seen the philosopher?

She felt under the bed with one hand. Yes—there lay the letter that had come during the night. It wasn't only a dream.

She had definitely seen the philosopher! And what's more, with her own eyes she had seen him take her letter!

She crouched down on the floor and pulled out all the typewritten pages from under the bed. But what was that? Right by the wall there was something red. A scarf, perhaps?

Sophie edged herself in under the bed and pulled out a red silk scarf. It wasn't hers, that was for sure!

She examined it more closely and gasped when she saw HILDE written in ink along the seam.

Hilde! But who was Hilde? How could their paths keep crossing like this?

SOCRATES

... wisest is she who know she does not know...

Sophie put on a summer dress and hurried down to the kitchen. Her mother was standing by the kitchen table. Sophie decided not to say anything about the silk scarf.

“Did you bring in the newspaper?” she asked. Her mother turned.

“Would you get it for me?”

Sophie was out of the door in a flash, down the gravel path to the mailbox.

Only the newspaper. She couldn't expect an answer so soon, she supposed. On the front page of the paper she read something about the Norwegian UN battalion in Lebanon.

The UN battalion ... wasn't that the postmark on the card from Hilde's father? But the postage stamp had been Norwegian. Maybe the Norwegian UN soldiers had their own post office with them.

“You've become very interested in the newspaper,” said her mother drily when Sophie returned to the kitchen.

Luckily her mother said no more about mailboxes and stuff, either during breakfast or later on that day. When she went shopping, Sophie took her letter about Fate down to the den.

She was surprised to see a little white envelope beside the cookie tin with the other letters from the philosopher. Sophie was quite sure she had not put it there.

This envelope was also wet around the edges. And it had a couple of deep holes in it, just like the one she had received yesterday.

Had the philosopher been here? Did he know about her secret hiding place? Why was the envelope wet?

All these questions made her head spin. She opened the letter and read the note:

Dear Sophie,

I read your letter with great interest—and not without some regret. I must unfortunately disappoint you with regard to

the invitation. We shall meet one day, but it will probably be quite a while before I can come in person to Captain's Bend. I must add that from now on I will no longer be able to deliver the letters personally. It would be much too risky in the long run. In the future, letters will be delivered by my little messenger. On the other hand, they will be brought directly to the secret place in the garden.

You may continue to contact me whenever you feel the need. When you do, put a pink envelope out with a cookie or a lump of sugar in it. When the messenger finds it, he will bring it straight to me.

P.S. It is not pleasant to decline a young lady's invitation to coffee, but sometimes it is a matter of necessity.

P.P.S. If you should come across a red silk scarf anywhere, please take care of it. Sometimes personal property gets mixed up. Especially at school and places like that, and this is a philosophy school.

Yours, Alberto Knox

Sophie had lived for almost fifteen years, and had received quite a lot of letters in her young life, at least at Christmas and on birthdays. But this letter was the strangest one she had ever received.

It had no postage stamp. It hadn't even been put in the mailbox. It had been brought straight to Sophie's top-secret hideout in the old hedge. The fact that it was wet in the dry spring weather was also most mystifying.

The strangest thing of all was the silk scarf, of course. The philosopher must have another pupil.

That was it. And this other pupil had lost a red silk scarf. Right. But how had she managed to lose it under Sophie's bed?

And Alberto Knox ... what kind of a name was that?

One thing was confirmed—the connection between the philosopher and Hilde Moller Knag. But that Hilde's own father was now confusing their addresses—that was completely incomprehensible.

Sophie sat for a long time thinking about what connection there could possibly be between Hilde and herself. Finally she gave up.

The philosopher had written that she would meet him one day. Perhaps she would meet Hilde too.

She turned the letter over. She now saw that there were some sentences written on the back as well:

Is there such a thing as natural modesty?

Wisest is she who knows she does not know...

True insight comes from within.

He who knows what is right will do right.

Sophie knew that the short sentences that came in the white envelopes were intended to prepare her for the next big envelope, which would arrive shortly thereafter. She suddenly had an idea. If the “messenger” came to the den to deliver a brown envelope, Sophie could simply sit and wait for him. Or was it a her? She would definitely hang on to whoever it was until he or she told her more about the philosopher! The letter said that the “messenger” was little. Could it be a child? “Is there such a thing as natural modesty?” Sophie knew that “modesty” was an old-fashioned word for shyness—for example, about being seen naked. But was it really natural to be embarrassed about that? If something was natural, she supposed, it was the same for everybody. In many parts of the world it was completely natural to be naked. So it must be society that decides what you can and can’t do. When Grandma was young you certainly couldn’t sunbathe topless. But today, most people think it is “natural,” even though it is still strictly forbidden in lots of countries. Was this philosophy? Sophie wondered.

The next sentence was: “Wisest is she who knows she does not know.”

Wiser than who? If the philosopher meant that someone who realized that she didn’t know everything under the sun was wiser than someone who knew just a little, but who thought she knew a whole lot—well, that wasn’t so difficult to agree with. Sophie had never thought about it before. But the more she did, the more clearly she saw that knowing what you don’t know is also a kind of knowledge. The stupidest thing she knew was for people to act like they knew all about things they knew absolutely nothing about.

The next sentence was about true insight coming from within. But didn't all knowledge come into people's heads from the outside? On the other hand, Sophie could remember situations when her mother or the teachers at school had tried to teach her something that she hadn't been receptive to. And whenever she had really learned something, it was when she had somehow contributed to it herself. Now and then, even, she would suddenly understand a thing she'd drawn a total blank on before. That was probably what people meant by "insight."

So far, so good. Sophie thought she had done reasonably well on the first three questions. But the next statement was so odd she couldn't help smiling: "He who knows what is right will do right."

Did that mean that when a bank robber robbed a bank it was because he didn't know any better?

Sophie didn't think so.

On the contrary, she thought that both children and adults did stupid things that they probably regretted afterwards, precisely because they had done them against their better judgment.

While she sat thinking, she heard something rustling in the dry undergrowth on the other side of the hedge nearest the woods. Could it be the messenger? Her heart started beating faster. It sounded like a panting animal was coming.

The next moment a big Labrador pushed its way into the den. In its mouth it held a big brown envelope which it dropped at Sophie's feet. It all happened so quickly that Sophie had no time to react. A second later she was sitting with the big envelope in her hands—and the golden Labrador had scampered off into the woods again.

Once it was all over she reacted. She started to cry. She sat like that for a while, losing all sense of time. Then she looked up suddenly.

So that was his famous messenger! Sophie breathed a sigh of relief. Of course that was why the white envelopes were wet around the edges and had holes in them. Why hadn't she thought of it? Now it made sense to put a cookie or a lump of sugar in the envelope when she wrote to the philosopher.

She may not always have been as smart as she would like, but who could have guessed that the messenger was a trained dog! It was a bit out of the ordinary, to put it mildly! She could certainly forget all about forcing the messenger to reveal Alberto Knox's whereabouts.

Sophie opened the big envelope and began to read.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF ATHENS

Dear Sophie, When you read this you may already have met Hermes. In case you haven't, I'll add that he is a dog. But don't worry. He is very good-tempered—and moreover, a good deal more intelligent than a lot of people. In any event he never tries to give the impression of being cleverer than he is.

You may also note that his name is not without significance.

In Greek mythology, Hermes was the messenger of the gods. He was also the god of seafarers, but we shall not bother about that, at least not for the moment. It is more important that Hermes also gave his name to the word "hermetic," which means hidden or inaccessible— not inappropriate for the way Hermes takes care to keep the two of us hidden from each other.

So the messenger has herewith been introduced. Naturally he answers to his name and is altogether very well behaved.

But to return to philosophy. We have already completed the first part of the course. I refer to the natural philosophers and their decisive break with the mythological world picture. Now we are going to meet the three great classical philosophers, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Each in his own way, these philosophers influenced the whole of European civilization.

The natural philosophers are also called the pre-Socratics, because they lived before Socrates. Although Democritus died some years after Socrates, all his ideas belong to pre-Socratic natural philosophy. Socrates represents a new era, geographically as well as temporally. He was the first of the great philosophers to be born in Athens, and both he and his two successors lived and worked there. You may recall that Anaxagoras also lived in Athens for a while but was hounded out because he said the sun was a red-hot stone. (Socrates fared no better!)

From the time of Socrates, Athens was the center of Greek culture. It is also important to note the change of character in the philosophical project itself as it progresses from natural philosophy to Socrates. But before we meet Socrates, let us hear a little about the so-called Sophists, who dominated the Athenian scene at the time of Socrates.

Curtain up, Sophie! The history of ideas is like a drama in many acts.

Man at the Center

After about 450 B.C., Athens was the cultural center of the Greek world. From this time on, philosophy took a new direction. The natural philosophers had been mainly concerned with the nature of the physical world. This gives them a central position in the history of science. In Athens, interest was now focused on the individual and the individual's place in society.

Gradually a democracy evolved, with popular assemblies and courts of law.

In order for democracy to work, people had to be educated enough to take part in the democratic process. We have seen in our own time how a young democracy needs popular enlightenment. For the Athenians, it was first and foremost essential to master the art of rhetoric, which means saying things in a convincing manner.

A group of itinerant teachers and philosophers from the Greek colonies flocked to Athens.

They called themselves Sophists. The word “sophist” means a wise and informed person. In Athens, the Sophists made a living out of teaching the citizens for money.

The Sophists had one characteristic in common with the natural philosophers: they were critical of the traditional mythology. But at the same time the Sophists rejected what they regarded as fruitless philosophical speculation. Their opinion was that although answers to philosophical questions may exist, man cannot know the truth about the riddles of nature and of the universe. In philosophy a view like this is called skepticism.

But even if we cannot know the answers to all of nature’s riddles, we know that people have to learn to live together. The Sophists chose to concern themselves with man and his place in society.

“Man is the measure of all things,” said the Sophist Protagoras (c. 485-410 B.C.). By that he meant that the question of whether a thing is right or wrong, good or bad, must always be considered in relation to a person’s needs. On being asked whether he believed in the Greek gods, he answered, “The question is complex and life is short.” A person who is unable to say categorically whether or not the gods or God exists is called an agnostic.

The Sophists were as a rule men who had traveled widely and seen different forms of government. Both conventions and local laws in the city-states could vary widely. This led the Sophists to raise the question of what was natural and what was socially induced. By doing this, they paved the way for social criticism in the city-state of Athens.

They could for example point out that the use of an expression like “natural modesty” is not always defensible, for if it is “natural” to be modest, it must be something you are born with, something innate. But is it really innate, Sophie—or is it socially induced? To someone who has traveled the world, the answer should be simple: It is not “natural”—or innate—to be afraid to show yourself naked. Modesty—or the lack of it—is first and foremost a matter of social convention.

As you can imagine, the wandering Sophists created bitter

wrangling in Athens by pointing out that there were no absolute norms for what was right or wrong.

Socrates, on the other hand, tried to show that some such norms are in fact absolute and universally valid.

Who Was Socrates?

Socrates (470-399 B.C.) is possibly the most enigmatic figure in the entire history of philosophy. He never wrote a single line. Yet he is one of the philosophers who has had the greatest influence on European thought, not least because of the dramatic manner of his death.

We know he was born in Athens, and that he spent most of his life in the city squares and marketplaces talking with the people he met there. "The trees in the countryside can teach me nothing," he said. He could also stand lost in thought for hours on end.

Even during his lifetime he was considered somewhat enigmatic, and fairly soon after his death he was held to be the founder of any number of different philosophical schools of thought. The very fact that he was so enigmatic and ambiguous made it possible for widely differing schools of thought to claim him as their own.

We know for a certainty that he was extremely ugly. He was potbellied, and had bulging eyes and a snub nose. But inside he was said to be "perfectly delightful." It was also said of him that "You can seek him in the present, you can seek him in the past, but you will never find his equal." Nevertheless he was sentenced to death for his philosophical activities.

The life of Socrates is mainly known to us through the writings of Plato, who was one of his pupils and who became one of the greatest philosophers of all time. Plato wrote a number of Dialogues, or dramatized discussions on philosophy, in which he uses Socrates as his principal character and mouthpiece.

Since Plato is putting his own philosophy in Socrates' mouth, we cannot be sure that the words he speaks in the dialogues were ever actually uttered by him. So it is no easy matter to distinguish between the teachings of Socrates and the philosophy of Plato.

Exactly the same problem applies to many other historical persons who left no written accounts. The classic example, of course, is Jesus. We cannot be certain that the “historical” Jesus actually spoke the words that Matthew or Luke ascribed to him. Similarly, what the “historical” Socrates actually said will always be shrouded in mystery.

But who Socrates “really” was is relatively unimportant. It is Plato’s portrait of Socrates that has inspired thinkers in the Western world for nearly 2,500 years.

The Art of Discourse

The essential nature of Socrates’ art lay in the fact that he did not appear to want to instruct people. On the contrary he gave the impression of one desiring to learn from those he spoke with. So instead of lecturing like a traditional schoolmaster, he discussed.

Obviously he would not have become a famous philosopher had he confined himself purely to listening to others. Nor would he have been sentenced to death. But he just asked questions, especially to begin a conversation, as if he knew nothing. In the course of the discussion he would generally get his opponents to recognize the weakness of their arguments, and, forced into a corner, they would finally be obliged to realize what was right and what was wrong.

Socrates, whose mother was a midwife, used to say that his art was like the art of the midwife. She does not herself give birth to the child, but she is there to help during its delivery. Similarly, Socrates saw his task as helping people to “give birth” to the correct insight, since real understanding must come from within. It cannot be imparted by someone else. And only the understanding that comes from within can lead to true insight.

Let me put it more precisely: The ability to give birth is a natural characteristic. In the same way, everybody can grasp philosophical truths if they just use their innate reason. Using your innate reason means reaching down inside yourself and using what is there.

By playing ignorant, Socrates forced the people he met to use their common sense.

Socrates could feign ignorance—or pretend to be dumber than he was. We call this Socratic irony. This enabled him to continually expose the weaknesses in people’s thinking. He was not averse to doing this in the middle of the city square. If you met Socrates, you thus might end up being made a fool of publicly.

So it is not surprising that, as time went by, people found him increasingly exasperating, especially people who had status in the community. “Athens is like a sluggish horse,” he is reputed to have said, “and I am the gadfly trying to sting it into life.”

(What do we do with gadflies, Sophie?)

A Divine Voice

It was not in order to torment his fellow beings that Socrates kept on stinging them.

Something within him left him no choice. He always said that he had a “divine voice” inside him. Socrates protested, for example, against having any part in condemning people to death. He moreover refused to inform on his political enemies. This was eventually to cost him his life.

In the year 399 B.C. he was accused of “introducing new gods and corrupting the youth,” as well as not believing in the accepted gods. With a slender majority, a jury of five hundred found him guilty.

He could very likely have appealed for leniency. At least he could have saved his life by agreeing to leave Athens. But had he done this he would not have been Socrates. He valued his conscience—and the truth—higher than life. He assured the jury that he had only acted in the best interests of the state. He was nevertheless condemned to drink hemlock. Shortly thereafter, he drank the poison in the presence of his friends, and died.

Why, Sophie? Why did Socrates have to die? People have been asking this question for 2,400 years. However, he was not the only person in history to have seen things through to the bitter end and suffered death for the sake of their convictions.

I have mentioned Jesus already, and in fact there are several striking parallels between them.

Both Jesus and Socrates were enigmatic personalities, also to their contemporaries.

Neither of them wrote down their teachings, so we are forced to rely on the picture we have of them from their disciples. But we do know that they were both masters of the art of discourse. They both spoke with a characteristic self-assuredness that could fascinate as well as exasperate. And not least, they both believed that they spoke on behalf of something greater than themselves. They challenged the power of the community by criticizing all forms of injustice and corruption. And finally—their activities cost them their lives.

The trials of Jesus and Socrates also exhibit clear parallels.

They could certainly both have saved themselves by appealing for mercy, but they both felt they had a mission that would have been betrayed unless they kept faith to the bitter end. And by meeting their death so bravely they commanded an enormous following, also after they had died.

I do not mean to suggest that Jesus and Socrates were alike. I am merely drawing attention to the fact that they both had a message that was inseparably linked to their personal courage.

A Joker in Athens

Socrates, Sophie! We aren't done with him yet. We have talked about his method. But what was his philosophical project?

Socrates lived at the same time as the Sophists. Like them, he was more concerned with man and his place in society than with the forces of nature. As a Roman philosopher, Cicero, said of him a few hundred years later, Socrates “called philosophy down from the sky and established her in the towns and introduced her into homes and forced her to investigate life, ethics, good and evil.”

But Socrates differed from the Sophists in one significant way. He did not consider himself to be a “sophist”—that is, a learned or wise person. Unlike the Sophists, he did not teach for money. No, Socrates called himself a philosopher in the true sense of the word. A “philosopher” really means “one who loves wisdom.”

Are you sitting comfortably, Sophie? Because it is central to

the rest of this course that you fully understand the difference between a sophist and a philosopher. The Sophists took money for their more or less hairsplitting expoundings, and sophists of this kind have come and gone from time immemorial. I am referring to all the schoolmasters and self-opinionated know-it-alls who are satisfied with what little they know, or who boast of knowing a whole lot about subjects they haven't the faintest notion of. You have probably come across a few of these sophists in your young life. A real philosopher, Sophie, is a completely different kettle of fish—the direct opposite, in fact. A philosopher knows that in reality he knows very little. That is why he constantly strives to achieve true insight. Socrates was one of these rare people. He knew that he knew nothing about life and about the world. And now comes the important part: it troubled him that he knew so little.

A philosopher is therefore someone who recognizes that there is a lot he does not understand, and is troubled by it. In that sense, he is still wiser than all those who brag about their knowledge of things they know nothing about. “Wisest is she who knows she does not know,” I said previously. Socrates himself said, “One thing only I know, and that is that I know nothing.”

Remember this statement, because it is an admission that is rare, even among philosophers. Moreover, it can be so dangerous to say it in public that it can cost you your life. The most subversive people are those who ask questions. Giving answers is not nearly as threatening. Any one question can be more explosive than a thousand answers.

You remember the story of the emperor's new clothes? The emperor was actually stark naked but none of his subjects dared say so. Suddenly a child burst out, “But he's got nothing on!” That was a courageous child, Sophie. Like Socrates, who dared tell people how little we humans know. The similarity between children and philosophers is something we have already talked about.

To be precise: Mankind is faced with a number of difficult questions that we have no satisfactory answers to. So now two possibilities present themselves: We can either fool ourselves and the rest of the world by pretending that we know all there is to know,

or we can shut our eyes to the central issues once and for all and abandon all progress. In this sense, humanity is divided. People are, generally speaking, either dead certain or totally indifferent. (Both types are crawling around deep down in the rabbit's fur!)

It is like dividing a deck of cards into two piles, Sophie. You lay the black cards in one pile and the red in the other. But from time to time a joker turns up that is neither heart nor club, neither diamond nor spade. Socrates was this joker in Athens. He was neither certain nor indifferent. All he knew was that he knew nothing—and it troubled him. So he became a philosopher—someone who does not give up but tirelessly pursues his quest for truth.

An Athenian is said to have asked the oracle at Delphi who the wisest man in Athens was. The oracle answered that Socrates of all mortals was the wisest. When Socrates heard this he was astounded, to put it mildly. (He must have laughed, Sophie!) He went straight to the person in the city whom he, and everyone else, thought was excessively wise. But when it turned out that this person was unable to give Socrates satisfactory answers to his questions, Socrates realized that the oracle had been right.

Socrates felt that it was necessary to establish a solid foundation for our knowledge. He believed that this foundation lay in man's reason. With his unshakable faith in human reason he was decidedly a rationalist.

The Right Insight Leads to the Right Action

As I have mentioned earlier, Socrates claimed that he was guided by a divine inner voice, and that this "conscience" told him what was right. "He who knows what good is will do good," he said.

By this he meant that the right insight leads to the right action. And only he who does right can be a "virtuous man." When we do wrong it is because we don't know any better. That is why it is so important to go on learning. Socrates was concerned with finding clear and universally valid definitions of right and wrong. Unlike the Sophists, he believed that the ability to distinguish between right and wrong lies in people's reason and not in society.

You may perhaps think this last part is a bit too obscure, Sophie. Let me put it like this: Socrates thought that no one could possibly be happy if they acted against their better judgment. And he who knows how to achieve happiness will do so. Therefore, he who knows what is right will do right. Because why would anybody choose to be unhappy?

What do you think, Sophie? Can you live a happy life if you continually do things you know deep down are wrong? There are lots of people who lie and cheat and speak ill of others.

Are they aware that these things are not right—or fair, if you prefer? Do you think these people are happy?

Socrates didn't.

When Sophie had read the letter, she quickly put it in the cookie tin and crawled out into the garden. She wanted to go indoors before her mother got back with the shopping in order to avoid any questions about where she had been. And she had promised to do the dishes.

She had just filled the sink with water when her mother came staggering in with two huge shopping bags. Perhaps that was why her mother said, "You are rather preoccupied these days, Sophie."

Sophie didn't know why she said it; the words just tumbled out of her mouth: "So was Socrates." "Socrates?"

Her mother stared at her, wide-eyed.

"It was just so sad that he had to die as a result," Sophie went on thoughtfully. "My goodness! Sophie! I don't know what I'm to do!"

"Neither did Socrates. All he knew was that he knew nothing. And yet he was the cleverest person in Athens."

Her mother was speechless.

Finally she said, "Is this something you've learned at school?" Sophie shook her head energetically.

"We don't learn anything there. The difference between schoolteachers and philosophers is that school-teachers think they know a lot of stuff that they try to force down our throats. Philosophers try to figure things out together with the pupils."

"Now we're back to white rabbits again! You know something?"

I demand to know who your boyfriend really is. Otherwise I'll begin to think he is a bit disturbed."

Sophie turned her back on the dishes and pointed at her mother with the dish mop.

"It's not him who's disturbed. But he likes to disturb others—to shake them out of their rut." "That's enough of that! I think he sounds a bit too impertinent." Sophie turned back to the dishes. "He is neither impertinent nor pertinent," said Sophie. "But he is trying to reach real wisdom.

That's the great difference between a real joker and all the other cards in the deck." "Did you say joker?"

Sophie nodded. "Have you ever thought about the fact that there are a lot of hearts and diamonds in a pack of cards? And a lot of spades and clubs. But there's only one joker."

"Good grief, how you talk back, Sophie!" "And how you ask!"

Her mother had put all the groceries away. Now she took the newspaper and went into the living room. Sophie thought she closed the door more loudly than usual.

Sophie finished doing the dishes and went upstairs to her room. She had put the red silk scarf on the top shelf of the closet with the Lego blocks. She took it down and examined it carefully.

Hilde ...

Athens

... several tall buildings had risen from the ruins ...

Early that evening Sophie's mother went to visit a friend. As soon as she was out of the house Sophie went down the garden to the den. There she found a thick package beside the big cookie tin. Sophie tore it open. It was a video cassette.

She ran back to the house. A video tape! How on earth did the philosopher know they had a VCR?

And what was on the cassette?

Sophie put the cassette into the recorder. A sprawling city appeared on the TV screen. As the camera zoomed in on the Acropolis Sophie realized that the city must be Athens. She had often seen pictures of the ancient ruins there.

It was a live shot. Summer-clad tourists with cameras slung about them were swarming among the ruins. One of them looked as if he was carrying a notice board. There it was again. Didn't it say "Hilde"?

After a minute or two there was a close-up of a middle-aged man. He was rather short, with a black, well-trimmed beard, and he was wearing a blue beret. He looked into the camera and said: "Welcome to Athens, Sophie. As you have probably guessed, I am Alberto Knox. If not, I will just reiterate that the big rabbit is still being pulled from the top hat of the universe.

"We are standing at the Acropolis. The word means 'citadel'— or more precisely, 'the city on the hill.' People have lived up here since the Stone Age. The reason, naturally, was its unique location. The elevated plateau was easy to defend against marauders. From the Acropolis there was also an excellent view down to one of the best harbors in the Mediterranean. As the early Athens began to develop on the plain below the plateau, the Acropolis was used as a fortress and sacred shrine... During the first half of the fifth century B.C., a bitter war was waged against the Persians, and in 480 the Persian king Xerxes plundered Athens and burned all the old wooden buildings of the Acropolis. A year later the Persians were

defeated, and that was the beginning of the Golden Age of Athens. The Acropolis was rebuilt—prouder and more magnificent than ever—and now purely as a sacred shrine.

“This was the period when Socrates walked through the streets and squares talking with the Athenians. He could thus have witnessed the rebirth of the Acropolis and watched the construction of all the proud buildings we see around us. And what a building site it was! Behind me you can see the biggest temple, the Parthenon, which means ‘the Virgin’s Place.’ It was built in honor of Athene, the patron goddess of Athens. The huge marble structure does not have a single straight line; all four sides are slightly curved to make the building appear less heavy. In spite of its colossal dimensions, it gives the impression of lightness. In other words, it presents an optical illusion. The columns lean slightly inwards, and would form a pyramid 1,500 meters high if they were continued to a point above the temple. The temple contained nothing but a twelve-meter-high statue of Athene. The white marble, which in those days was painted in vivid colors, was transported here from a mountain sixteen kilometers away.”

Sophie sat with her heart in her mouth. Was this really the philosopher talking to her? She had only seen his profile that one time in the darkness. Could he be the same man who was now standing at the Acropolis in Athens?

He began to walk along the length of the temple and the camera followed him. He walked right to the edge of the terrace and pointed out over the landscape. The camera focused on an old theater which lay just below the plateau of the Acropolis.

“There you can see the old Dionysos Theater,” continued the man in the beret. “It is probably the very oldest theater in Europe. This is where the great tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were performed during the time of Socrates. I referred earlier to the ill-fated King Oedipus. The tragedy about him, by Sophocles, was first performed here. But they also played comedies. The best known writer of comedies was Aristophanes, who also wrote a spiteful comedy about Socrates as the buffoon of Athens. Right at the back you can see the stone wall which the actors used

as a backdrop. It was called skene, and is the origin of our word 'scene.' Incidentally, the word 'theater' comes from an old Greek word meaning 'to see.' But we must get back to the philosophers, Sophie. We are going around the Parthenon and down through the gateway ..."

The little man walked around the huge temple and passed some smaller temples on his right. Then he began to walk down some steps between several tall columns. When he reached the foot of the Acropolis, he went up a small hill and pointed out toward Athens: "The hill we are standing on is called Areopagos. It was here that the Athenian high court of justice passed judgment in murder trials. Many hundreds of years later, St. Paul the Apostle stood here and preached about Jesus and Christianity to the Athenians. We shall return to what he said on a later occasion. Down to the left you can see the remains of the old city square in Athens, the agora. With the exception of the large temple to Hephaestos, the god of smiths and metalworkers, only some blocks of marble are preserved. Let us go down ..."

The next moment he appeared among the ancient ruins. High up beneath the sky—at the top of Sophie's screen—towered the monumental Athene temple on the Acropolis. Her philosophy teacher had seated himself on one of the blocks of marble. He looked into the camera and said: "We are sitting in the old agora in Athens. A sorry sight, don't you think? Today, I mean. But once it was surrounded by splendid temples, courts of justice and other public offices, shops, a concert hall, and even a large gymnastics building. All situated around the square, which was a large open space ... The whole of European civilization was founded in this modest area.

"Words such as politics and democracy, economy and history, biology and physics, mathematics and logic, theology and philosophy, ethics and psychology, theory and method, idea and system date back to the tiny populace whose everyday life centered around this square. This is where Socrates spent so much of his time talking to the people he met. He might have buttonholed a slave

bearing a jar of olive oil, and asked the unfortunate man a question on philosophy, for Socrates held that a slave had the same common sense as a man of rank. Perhaps he stood in an animated wrangle with one of the citizens—or held a subdued conversation with his young pupil Plato. It is extraordinary to think about. We still speak of Socratic or Platonic philosophy, but actually being Plato or Socrates is quite another matter.”

Sophie certainly did think it was extraordinary to think about. But she thought it was just as extraordinary the way her philosopher was suddenly talking to her on a video that had been brought to her own secret hideout in the garden by a mysterious dog.

The philosopher rose from the block of marble he was sitting on and said quietly: “It was actually my intention to leave it at that, Sophie. I wanted you to see the Acropolis and the remains of the old agora in Athens. But I am not yet sure that you have grasped just how splendid these surroundings once were ... so I am very tempted to go a bit further. It is quite irregular of course ... but I am sure I can count on it remaining just between the two of us. Oh well, a tiny glimpse will suffice anyway ...”

He said no more, but remained standing there for a long time, staring into the camera. While he stood there, several tall buildings had risen from the ruins. As if by magic, all the old buildings were once again standing.

Above the skyline Sophie could still see the Acropolis, but now both that and all the buildings down on the square were brand-new. They were covered with gold and painted in garish colors. Gaily dressed people were strolling about the square. Some wore swords, others carried jars on their heads, and one of them had a roll of papyrus under his arm.

Then Sophie recognized her philosophy teacher. He was still wearing the blue beret, but now he was dressed in a yellow tunic in the same style as everyone else. He came toward Sophie, looked into the camera, and said:

“That’s better! Now we are in the Athens of antiquity, Sophie. I wanted you to come here in person, you see. We are in the year 402 B.C., only three years before Socrates dies. I hope you

appreciate this exclusive visit because it was very difficult to hire a video camera ...”

Sophie felt dizzy. How could this weird man suddenly be in Athens 2,400 years ago? How could she be seeing a video film of a totally different age? There were no videos in antiquity ... so could this be a movie?

But all the marble buildings looked real. If they had recreated all of the old square in Athens as well as the Acropolis just for the sake of a film—the sets would have cost a fortune. At any rate it would be a colossal price to pay just to teach Sophie about Athens.

The man in the beret looked up at her again.

“Do you see those two men over there under the colonnade?”

Sophie noticed an elderly man in a crumpled tunic. He had a long unkempt beard, a snub nose, eyes like gimlets, and chubby cheeks. Beside him stood a handsome young man.

“That is Socrates and his young pupil, Plato. You are going to meet them personally.”

The philosopher went over to the two men, took off his beret, and said something which Sophie did not understand. It must have been in Greek. Then he looked into the camera and said, “I told them you were a Norwegian girl who would very much like to meet them. So now Plato will give you some questions to think about. But we must do it quickly before the guards discover us.”

Sophie felt the blood pounding in her temples as the young man stepped forward and looked into the camera.

“Welcome to Athens, Sophie,” he said in a gentle voice. He spoke with an accent. “My name is Plato and I am going to give you four tasks. First you must think over how a baker can bake fifty absolutely identical cookies. Then you can ask yourself why all horses are the same. Next you must decide whether you think that man has an immortal soul. And finally you must say whether men and women are equally sensible. Good luck!”

Then the picture on the TV screen disappeared. Sophie wound and rewound the tape but she had seen all there was.

Sophie tried to think things through clearly. But as soon as she thought one thought, another one crowded in before she had thought the first one to its end.

She had known from the start that her philosophy teacher was eccentric. But when he started to use teaching methods that defied all the laws of nature, Sophie thought he was going too far.

Had she really seen Socrates and Plato on TV? Of course not, that was impossible. But it definitely wasn't a cartoon.

Sophie took the cassette out of the video recorder and ran up to her room with it. She put it on the top shelf with all the Lego blocks. Then she sank onto the bed, exhausted, and fell asleep.

Some hours later her mother came into the room. She shook Sophie gently and said: "What's the matter, Sophie?"

"Mmmm?"

"You've gone to sleep with all your clothes on!" Sophie blinked her eyes sleepily.

"I've been to Athens," she mumbled. That was all she could manage to say as she turned over and went back to sleep.

Plato

... a longing to return to the realm of the soul...

Sophie woke with a start early the next morning. She glanced at the clock. It was only a little after five but she was so wide awake that she sat up in bed. Why was she wearing a dress? Then she remembered everything.

She climbed onto a stool and looked on the top shelf of the closet. Yes—there, at the back, was the video cassette. It hadn't been a dream after all; at least, not all of it.

But she couldn't really have seen Plato and Socrates ... oh, never mind! She didn't have the energy to think about it anymore. Perhaps her mother was right, perhaps she was acting a bit nuts these days.

Anyway, she couldn't go back to sleep. Perhaps she ought to go down to the den and see if the dog had left another letter. Sophie crept downstairs, put on a pair of jogging shoes, and went out.

In the garden everything was wonderfully clear and still. The birds were chirping so energetically that Sophie could hardly keep from laughing. The morning dew twinkled in the grass like drops of crystal. Once again she was struck by the incredible wonder of the world.

Inside the old hedge it was also very damp. Sophie saw no new letter from the philosopher, but nevertheless she wiped off one of the thick roots and sat down.

She recalled that the video-Plato had given her some questions to answer. The first was something about how a baker could bake fifty identical cookies.

Sophie had to think very carefully about that, because it definitely wouldn't be easy. When her mother occasionally baked a batch of cookies, they were never all exactly the same. But then she was not an expert pastry cook; sometimes the kitchen looked as if a bomb had hit it. Even the cookies they bought at the baker's were never exactly the same. Every single cookie was shaped separately in the baker's hands.

Then a satisfied smile spread over Sophie's face. She remembered how once she and her father went shopping while her mother was busy baking Christmas cookies. When they got back there were a lot of gingerbread men spread out on the kitchen table. Even though they weren't all perfect, in a way they were all the same. And why was that? Obviously because her mother had used the same mold for all of them.

Sophie felt so pleased with herself for having remembered the incident that she pronounced herself done with the first question. If a baker makes fifty absolutely identical cookies, he must be using the same pastry mold for all of them. And that's that!

Then the video-Plato had looked into the camera and asked why all horses were the same. But they weren't, at all! On the contrary, Sophie thought no two horses were the same, just as no two people were the same.

She was ready to give up on that one when she remembered what she had thought about the cookies. No one of them was exactly like any of the others. Some were a bit thicker than the others, and some were broken. But still, everyone could see that they were—in a way—“exactly the same.”

What Plato was really asking was perhaps why a horse was always a horse, and not, for example, a cross between a horse and a pig. Because even though some horses were as brown as bears and others were as white as lambs, all horses had something in common. Sophie had yet to meet a horse with six or eight legs, for example.

But surely Plato couldn't believe that what made all horses alike was that they were made with the same mold?

Then Plato had asked her a really difficult question. Does man have an immortal soul? That was something Sophie felt quite unqualified to answer. All she knew was that dead bodies were either cremated or buried, so there was no future for them. If man had an immortal soul, one would have to believe that a person consisted of two separate parts: a body that gets worn out after many years—and a soul that operates more or less independently of what

happens to the body. Her grandmother had said once that she felt it was only her body that was old. Inside she had always been the same young girl. The thought of the “young girl” led Sophie to the last question: Are women and men equally sensible? She was not so sure about that. It depended on what Plato meant by sensible.

Something the philosopher had said about Socrates came into her mind. Socrates had pointed out that everyone could understand philosophical truths if they just used their common sense. He had also said that a slave had the same common sense as a nobleman. Sophie was sure that he would also have said that women had the same common sense as men.

While she sat thinking, there was a sudden rustling in the hedge, and the sound of something puffing and blowing like a steam engine. The next second, the golden Labrador slipped into the den. It had a large envelope in its mouth.

“Hermes!” cried Sophie. “Drop it! Drop it!” The dog dropped the envelope in Sophie’s lap, and Sophie stretched out her hand to pat the dog’s head. “Good boy, Hermes!” she said. The dog lay down and allowed itself to be patted. But after a couple of minutes it got up and began to push its way back through the hedge the same way it had come in. Sophie followed with the brown envelope in her hand. She crawled through the dense thicket and was soon outside the garden.

Hermes had already started to run toward the edge of the woods, and Sophie followed a few yards behind. Twice the dog turned around and growled, but Sophie was not to be deterred.

This time she was determined to find the philosopher—even if it meant running all the way to Athens.

The dog ran faster and suddenly turned off down a narrow path. Sophie chased him, but after a few minutes he turned and faced her, barking like a watchdog. Sophie still refused to give up, taking the opportunity to lessen the distance between them.

Hermes turned and raced down the path. Sophie realized that she would never catch up with him. She stood quite still for what seemed like an eternity, listening to him running farther and farther away. Then all was silent.

She sat down on a tree stump by a little clearing in the woods. She still had the brown envelope in her hand. She opened it, drew out several typewritten pages, and began to read:

PLATO'S ACADEMY

Thank you for the pleasant time we spent together, Sophie. In Athens, I mean. So now I have at least introduced myself. And since I have also introduced Plato, we might as well begin without further ado.

Plato (428-347 B.C.) was twenty-nine years old when Socrates drank the hemlock. He had been a pupil of Socrates for some time and had followed his trial very closely. The fact that Athens could condemn its noblest citizen to death did more than make a profound impression on him. It was to shape the course of his entire philosophic endeavor.

To Plato, the death of Socrates was a striking example of the conflict that can exist between society as it really is and the true or ideal society. Plato's first deed as a philosopher was to publish Socrates' *Apology*, an account of his plea to the large jury.

As you will no doubt recall, Socrates never wrote anything down, although many of the pre-Socratics did. The problem is that hardly any of their written material remains. But in the case of Plato, we believe that all his principal works have been preserved. (In addition to Socrates' *Apology*, Plato wrote a collection of Epistles and about twenty-five philosophical Dialogues.) That we have these works today is due not least to the fact that Plato set up his own school of philosophy in a grove not far from Athens, named after the legendary Greek hero Academus. The school was therefore known as the Academy. (Since then, many thousands of "academies" have been established all over the world. We still speak of "academics" and "academic subjects.")

The subjects taught at Plato's Academy were philosophy, mathematics, and gymnastics—although perhaps "taught" is hardly the right word. Lively discourse was considered most important at Plato's Academy. So it was not purely by chance that Plato's writings took the form of dialogues.

The Eternally True, Eternally Beautiful, and Eternally Good

In the introduction to this course I mentioned that it could often be a good idea to ask what a particular philosopher's project was. So now I ask: what were the problems Plato was concerned with?

Briefly, we can establish that Plato was concerned with the relationship between what is eternal and immutable, on the one hand, and what "flows," on the other. (Just like the pre-Socratics, in fact.) We've seen how the Sophists and Socrates turned their attention from questions of natural philosophy to problems related to man and society. And yet in one sense, even Socrates and the Sophists were preoccupied with the relationship between the eternal and immutable, and the "flowing." They were interested in the problem as it related to human morals and society's ideals or virtues. Very briefly, the Sophists thought that perceptions of what was right or wrong varied from one city-state to another, and from one generation to the next. So right and wrong was something that "flowed." This was totally unacceptable to Socrates. He believed in the existence of eternal and absolute rules for what was right or wrong. By using our common sense we can all arrive at these immutable norms, since human reason is in fact eternal and immutable.

Do you follow, Sophie? Then along comes Plato. He is concerned with both what is eternal and immutable in nature and what is eternal and immutable as regards morals and society. To Plato, these two problems were one and the same. He tried to grasp a "reality" that was eternal and immutable. And to be quite frank, that is precisely what we need philosophers for. We do not need them to choose a beauty queen or the day's bargain in tomatoes. (This is why they are often unpopular!) Philosophers will try to ignore highly topical affairs and instead try to draw people's attention to what is eternally "true," eternally "beautiful," and eternally "good."

We can thus begin to glimpse at least the outline of Plato's philosophical project. But let's take one thing at a time. We are attempting to understand an extraordinary mind, a mind that was to

have a profound influence on all subsequent European philosophy.

The World of Ideas

Both Empedocles and Democritus had drawn attention to the fact that although in the natural world everything “flows,” there must nevertheless be “something” that never changes (the “four roots,” or the “atoms”). Plato agreed with the proposition as such—but in quite a different way.

Plato believed that everything tangible in nature “flows.” So there are no “substances” that do not dissolve. Absolutely everything that belongs to the “material world” is made of a material that time can erode, but everything is made after a timeless “mold” or “form” that is eternal and immutable.

You see? No, you don’t.

Why are horses the same, Sophie? You probably don’t think they are at all. But there is something that all horses have in common, something that enables us to identify them as horses. A particular horse “flows,” naturally. It might be old and lame, and in time it will die. But the “form” of the horse is eternal and immutable.

That which is eternal and immutable, to Plato, is therefore not a physical “basic substance,” as it was for Empedocles and Democritus. Plato’s conception was of eternal and immutable patterns, spiritual and abstract in their nature that all things are fashioned after.

Let me put it like this: The pre-Socratics had given a reasonably good explanation of natural change without having to presuppose that anything actually “changed.” In the midst of nature’s cycle there were some eternal and immutable smallest elements that did not dissolve, they thought. Fair enough, Sophie! But they had no reasonable explanation for how these “smallest elements” that were once building blocks in a horse could suddenly whirl together four or five hundred years later and fashion themselves into a completely new horse. Or an elephant or a crocodile, for that matter. Plato’s point was that Democritus’ atoms never fashioned themselves into an “eledile” or a “crocophant.” This was what set his philosophical reflections going.

If you already understand what I am getting at, you may skip

this next paragraph. But just in case, I will clarify: You have a box of Lego and you build a Lego horse. You then take it apart and put the blocks back in the box. You cannot expect to make a new horse just by shaking the box. How could Lego blocks of their own accord find each other and become a new horse again? No, you have to rebuild the horse, Sophie. And the reason you can do it is that you have a picture in your mind of what the horse looked like. The Lego horse is made from a model which remains unchanged from horse to horse.

How did you do with the fifty identical cookies? Let us assume that you have dropped in from outer space and have never seen a baker before. You stumble into a tempting bakery— and there you catch sight of fifty identical gingerbread men on a shelf. I imagine you would wonder how they could be exactly alike. It might well be that one of them has an arm missing, another has lost a bit of its head, and a third has a funny bump on its stomach. But after careful thought, you would nevertheless conclude that all gingerbread men have something in common. Although none of them is perfect, you would suspect that they had a common origin. You would realize that all the cookies were formed in the same mold. And what is more, Sophie, you are now seized by the irresistible desire to see this mold. Because clearly, the mold itself must be utter perfection—and in a sense, more beautiful—in comparison with these crude copies.

If you solved this problem all by yourself, you arrived at the philosophical solution in exactly the same way that Plato did.

Like most philosophers, he “dropped in from outer space.” (He stood up on the very tip of one of the fine hairs of the rabbit’s fur.) He was astonished at the way all natural phenomena could be so alike, and he concluded that it had to be because there are a limited number of forms “behind” everything we see around us. Plato called these forms ideas. Behind every horse, pig, or human being, there is the “idea horse,” “idea pig,” and “idea human being.” (In the same way, the bakery we spoke of can have gingerbread men, gingerbread horses, and gingerbread pigs. Because every self-respecting bakery has more than one mold. But one mold is enough for each type of gingerbread cookie.)

Plato came to the conclusion that there must be a reality behind the “material world.” He called this reality the world of ideas; it contained the eternal and immutable “patterns” behind the various phenomena we come across in nature. This remarkable view is known as Plato’s theory of ideas.

True Knowledge

I’m sure you’ve been following me, Sophie dear. But you may be wondering whether Plato was being serious. Did he really believe that forms like these actually existed in a completely different reality?

He probably didn’t believe it literally in the same way for all his life, but in some of his dialogues that is certainly how he means to be understood. Let us try to follow his train of thought.

A philosopher, as we have seen, tries to grasp something that is eternal and immutable.

It would serve no purpose, for instance, to write a philosophic treatise on the existence of a particular soap bubble. Partly because one would hardly have time to study it in depth before it burst, and partly because it would probably be rather difficult to find a market for a philosophic treatise on something nobody has ever seen, and which only existed for five seconds.

Plato believed that everything we see around us in nature, everything tangible, can be likened to a soap bubble, since nothing that exists in the world of the senses is lasting. We know, of course, that sooner or later every human being and every animal will die and decompose. Even a block of marble changes and gradually disintegrates. (The Acropolis is falling into ruin, Sophie! It is a scandal, but that’s the way it is.) Plato’s point is that we can never have true knowledge of anything that is in a constant state of change. We can only have opinions about things that belong to the world of the senses, tangible things. We can only have true knowledge of things that can be understood with our reason.

All right, Sophie, I’ll explain it more clearly: a gingerbread man can be so lopsided after all that baking that it can be quite hard to see what it is meant to be. But having seen dozens of gingerbread men that were more or less successful, I can be pretty sure what the

cookie mold was like. I can guess, even though I have never seen it. It might not even be an advantage to see the actual mold with my own eyes because we cannot always trust the evidence of our senses. The faculty of vision can vary from person to person. On the other hand, we can rely on what our reason tells us because that is the same for everyone.

If you are sitting in a classroom with thirty other pupils, and the teacher asks the class which color of the rainbow is the prettiest, he will probably get a lot of different answers. But if he asks what 8 times 3 is, the whole class will—we hope—give the same answer. Because now reason is speaking and reason is, in a way, the direct opposite of “thinking so” or “feeling.” We could say that reason is eternal and universal precisely because it only expresses eternal and universal states.

Plato found mathematics very absorbing because mathematical states never change. They are therefore states we can have true knowledge of. But here we need an example.

Imagine you find a round pinecone out in the woods. Perhaps you say you “think” it looks completely round, whereas Joanna insists it is a bit flattened on one side. (Then you start arguing about it!) But you cannot have true knowledge of anything you can perceive with your eyes. On the other hand you can say with absolute certainty that the sum of the angles in a circle is 360 degrees. In this case you would be talking about an ideal circle which might not exist in the physical world but which you can clearly visualize. (You are dealing with the hidden gingerbread-man mold and not with the particular cookie on the kitchen table.)

In short, we can only have inexact conceptions of things we perceive with our senses. But we can have true knowledge of things we understand with our reason. The sum of the angles in a triangle will remain 180 degrees to the end of time. And similarly the “idea” horse will walk on four legs even if all the horses in the sensory world break a leg.

An Immortal Soul

As I explained, Plato believed that reality is divided into two regions.

One region is the world of the senses, about which we can only

have approximate or incomplete knowledge by using our five (approximate or incomplete) senses. In this sensory world, “everything flows” and nothing is permanent. Nothing in the sensory world is, there are only things that come to be and pass away.

The other region is the world of ideas, about which we can have true knowledge by using our reason. This world of ideas cannot be perceived by the senses, but the ideas (or forms) are eternal and immutable.

According to Plato, man is a dual creature. We have a body that “flows,” is inseparably bound to the world of the senses, and is subject to the same fate as everything else in this world—a soap bubble, for example. All our senses are based in the body and are consequently unreliable. But we also have an immortal soul—and this soul is the realm of reason. And not being physical, the soul can survey the world of ideas.

But that’s not all, Sophie. IT’S NOT ALL!

Plato also believed that the soul existed before it inhabited the body, (it was lying on a shelf in the closet with all the cookie molds.) But as soon as the soul wakes up in a human body, it has forgotten all the perfect ideas. Then something starts to happen. In fact, a wondrous process begins. As the human being discovers the various forms in the natural world, a vague recollection stirs his soul. He sees a horse—but an imperfect horse. (A gingerbread horse!) The sight of it is sufficient to awaken in the soul a faint recollection of the perfect “horse,” which the soul once saw in the world of ideas, and this stirs the soul with a yearning to return to its true realm. Plato calls this yearning *eros*—which means love. The soul, then, experiences a “longing to return to its true origin.” From now on, the body and the whole sensory world is experienced as imperfect and insignificant. The soul yearns to fly home on the wings of love to the world of ideas. It longs to be freed from the chains of the body.

Let me quickly emphasize that Plato is describing an ideal course of life, since by no means all humans set the soul free to begin its journey back to the world of ideas. Most people cling to the sensory world’s “reflections” of ideas. They see a horse—and another horse. But they never see that of which every horse is only

a feeble imitation. (They rush into the kitchen and stuff themselves with gingerbread cookies without so much as a thought as to where they came from.) What Plato describes is the philosophers' way. His philosophy can be read as a description of philosophic practice.

When you see a shadow, Sophie, you will assume that there must be something casting the shadow. You see the shadow of an animal. You think it may be a horse, but you are not quite sure. So you turn around and see the horse itself—which of course is infinitely more beautiful and sharper in outline than the blurred "horse-shadow." Plato believed similarly that all natural phenomena are merely shadows of the eternal forms or ideas. But most people are content with a life among shadows. They give no thought to what is casting the shadows. They think shadows are all there are, never realizing even that they are, in fact, shadows. And thus they pay no heed to the immortality of their own soul.

Out of the Darkness of the Cave

Plato relates a myth which illustrates this. We call it the Myth of the Cave. I'll retell it in my own words.

Imagine some people living in an underground cave. They sit with their backs to the mouth of the cave with their hands and feet bound in such a way that they can only look at the back wall of the cave. Behind them is a high wall, and behind that wall pass human-like creatures, holding up various figures above the top of the wall. Because there is a fire behind these figures, they cast flickering shadows on the back wall of the cave. So the only thing the cave dwellers can see is this shadow play. They have been sitting in this position since they were born, so they think these shadows are all there are.

Imagine now that one of the cave dwellers manages to free himself from his bonds. The first thing he asks himself is where all these shadows on the cave wall come from. What do you think happens when he turns around and sees the figures being held up above the wall? To begin with he is dazzled by the sharp sunlight. He is also dazzled by the clarity of the figures because until now he has only seen their shadow. If he manages to climb over the wall and get past the fire into the world outside, he will be even more

dazzled. But after rubbing his eyes he will be struck by the beauty of everything. For the first time he will see colors and clear shapes. He will see the real animals and flowers that the cave shadows were only poor reflections of. But even now he will ask himself where all the animals and flowers come from.

Then he will see the sun in the sky, and realize that this is what gives life to these flowers and animals, just as the fire made the shadows visible.

The joyful cave dweller could now have gone skipping away into the countryside, delighting in his new-found freedom. But instead he thinks of all the others who are still down in the cave. He goes back. Once there, he tries to convince the cave dwellers that the shadows on the cave wall are but flickering reflections of “real” things. But they don’t believe him. They point to the cave wall and say that what they see is all there is. Finally they kill him.

What Plato was illustrating in the Myth of the Cave is the philosopher’s road from shadowy images to the true ideas behind all natural phenomena. He was probably also thinking of Socrates, whom the “cave dwellers” killed because he disturbed their conventional ideas and tried to light the way to true insight. The Myth of the Cave illustrates Socrates’ courage and his sense of pedagogic responsibility.

Plato’s point was that the relationship between the darkness of the cave and the world beyond corresponds to the relationship between the forms of the natural world and the world of ideas. Not that he meant that the natural world is dark and dreary, but that it is dark and dreary in comparison with the clarity of ideas. A picture of a beautiful landscape is not dark and dreary either. But it is only a picture.

The Philosophic State

The Myth of the Cave is found in Plato’s dialogue the Republic. In this dialogue Plato also presents a picture of the “ideal state,” that is to say an imaginary, ideal, or what we would call a Utopian, state. Briefly, we could say that Plato believed the state should be governed by philosophers. He bases his explanation of this on the

construction of the human body.

According to Plato, the human body is composed of three parts: the head, the chest, and the abdomen. For each of these three parts there is a corresponding faculty of the soul.

Reason belongs to the head, will belongs to the chest, and appetite belongs to the abdomen. Each of these soul faculties also has an ideal, or "virtue." Reason aspires to wisdom, Will aspires to courage, and Appetite must be curbed so that temperance can be exercised. Only when the three parts of the body function together as a unity do we get a harmonious or "virtuous" individual. At school, a child must first learn to curb its appetites, then it must develop courage, and finally reason leads to wisdom.

Plato now imagines a state built up exactly like the tripartite human body. Where the body has head, chest, and abdomen, the State has rulers, auxiliaries, and fa-borers (farmers, for example). Here Plato clearly uses Greek medical science as his model. Just as a healthy and harmonious man exercises balance and temperance, so a "virtuous" state is characterized by everyone knowing their place in the overall picture.

Like every aspect of Plato's philosophy, his political philosophy is characterized by rationalism. The creation of a good state depends on its being governed with reason. Just as the head governs the body, so philosophers must rule society.

Let us attempt a simple illustration of the relationship between the three parts of man and the state:

BODY	SOUL	VIRTUE	STATE
Head	reason	wisdom	rulers
chest	will	courage	auxiliaries
abdomen	appetite	temperance	laborers

Plato's ideal state is not unlike the old Hindu caste system, in which each and every person has his or her particular function for the good of the whole. Even before Plato's time the Hindu caste system had the same tripartite division between the auxiliary caste (or priest caste), the warrior caste, and the laborer caste. Nowadays we would perhaps call Plato's state totalitarian. But it is worth

noting that he believed women could govern just as effectively as men for the simple reason that the rulers govern by virtue of their reason. Women, he asserted, have exactly the same powers of reasoning as men, provided they get the same training and are exempt from child rearing and housekeeping. In Plato's ideal state, rulers and warriors are not allowed family life or private property. The rearing of children is considered too important to be left to the individual and should be the responsibility of the state. (Plato was the first philosopher to advocate state-organized nursery schools and full-time education.)

After a number of significant political setbacks, Plato wrote the *Laws*, in which he described the "constitutional state" as the next-best state. He now reintroduced both private property and family ties. Women's freedom thus became more restricted. However, he did say that a state that does not educate and train women is like a man who only trains his right arm.

All in all, we can say that Plato had a positive view of women—considering the time he lived in. In the dialogue *Symposium*, he gives a woman, the legendary priestess Diotima, the honor of having given Socrates his philosophic insight.

So that was Plato, Sophie. His astonishing theories have been discussed—and criticized—for more than two thousand years. The first man to do so was one of the pupils from his own Academy. His name was Aristotle, and he was the third great philosopher from Athens.

I'll say no more!

While Sophie had been reading about Plato, the sun had risen over the woods to the east. It was peeping over the horizon just as she was reading how one man clambered out of the cave and blinked in the dazzling light outside.

It was almost as if she had herself emerged from an underground cave. Sophie felt that she saw nature in a completely different way after reading about Plato. It was rather like having been color-blind. She had seen some shadows but had not seen the clear ideas.

She was not sure Plato was right in everything he had said about

the eternal patterns, but it was a beautiful thought that all living things were imperfect copies of the eternal forms in the world of ideas. Because wasn't it true that all flowers, trees, human beings, and animals were "imperfect"?

Everything she saw around her was so beautiful and so alive that Sophie had to rub her eyes to really believe it. But nothing she was looking at now would last. And yet—in a hundred years the same flowers and the same animals would be here again. Even if every single flower and every single animal should fade away and be forgotten, there would be something that "reclected" how it all looked.

Sophie gazed out at the world. Suddenly a squirrel ran up the trunk of a pine tree. It circled the trunk a few times and disappeared into the branches.

"I've seen you before!" thought Sophie. She realized that maybe it was not the same squirrel that she had seen previously, but she had seen the same "form." For all she knew, Plato could have been right. Maybe she really had seen the eternal "squirrel" before—in the world of ideas, before her soul had taken residence in a human body.

Could it be true that she had lived before? Had her soul existed before it got a body to move around in? And was it really true that she carried a little golden nugget inside her—a jewel that cannot be corroded by time, a soul that would live on when her own body grew old and died?

The Major's Cabin

... the girl in the mirror winked with both eyes...

It was only a quarter past seven. There was no need to hurry home. Sophie's mother always took it easy on Sundays, so she would probably sleep for another two hours.

Should she go a bit farther into the woods and try to find Alberto Knox? And why had the dog snarled at her so viciously?

Sophie got up and began to walk down the path Hermes had taken. She had the brown envelope with the pages on Plato in her hand. Wherever the path diverged she took the wider one.

Birds were chirping everywhere—in the trees and in the air, in bush and thicket. They were busily occupied with their morning pursuits. They knew no difference between weekdays and Sundays. Who had taught them to do all that? Was there a tiny computer inside each one of them, programming them to do certain things?

The path led up over a little hill, then steeply down between tall pine trees. The woods were so dense now that she could only see a few yards between the trees.

Suddenly she caught sight of something glittering between the pine trunks. It must be a little lake. The path went the other way but Sophie picked her way among the trees. Without really knowing why, she let her feet lead her.

The lake was no bigger than a soccer field. Over on the other side she could see a red-painted cabin in a small clearing surrounded by silver birches. A faint wisp of smoke was rising from the chimney.

Sophie went down to the water's edge. It was very muddy in many places, but then she noticed a rowboat. It was drawn halfway out of the water. There was a pair of oars in it.

Sophie looked around. Whatever she did, it would be impossible to get around the lake to the red cabin without getting her shoes soaked. She went resolutely over to the boat and pushed it into the water. Then she climbed aboard, set the oars in the rowlocks, and rowed across the lake. The boat soon touched the opposite bank.

Sophie went ashore and tried to pull the boat up after her. The bank was much steeper here than the opposite bank had been.

She glanced over her shoulder only once before walking up toward the cabin.

She was quite startled at her own boldness. How did she dare do this? She had no idea. It was as if “something” impelled her.

Sophie went up to the door and knocked. She waited a while but nobody answered. She tried the handle cautiously, and the door opened.

“Hallo!” she called. “Is anyone at home?”

She went in and found herself in a living room. She dared not shut the door behind her.

Somebody was obviously living here. Sophie could hear wood crackling in the old stove. Someone had been here very recently.

On a big dining table stood a typewriter, some books, a couple of pencils, and a pile of paper. A smaller table and two chairs stood by the window that overlooked the lake. Apart from that there was very little furniture, although the whole of one wall was lined with bookshelves filled with books.

Above a white chest of drawers hung a large round mirror in a heavy brass frame. It looked very old.

On one of the walls hung two pictures. One was an oil painting of a white house which lay a stone’s throw from a little bay with a red boathouse. Between the house and the boathouse was a sloping garden with an apple tree, a few thick bushes, and some rocks. A dense fringe of birch trees framed the garden like a garland. The title of the painting was “Bjerkely.”

Beside that painting hung an old portrait of a man sitting in a chair by a window. He had a book in his lap. This picture also had a little bay with trees and rocks in the background. It looked as though it had been painted several hundred years ago. The title of the picture was “Berkeley.” The painter’s name was Smibert.

Berkeley and Bjerkely. How strange!

Sophie continued her investigation. A door led from the living room to a small kitchen. Someone had just done the dishes. Plates and glasses were piled on a tea towel, some of them still glistening with drops of soapy water. There was a tin bowl on the floor with

some leftover scraps of food in it. Whoever lived here had a pet, a dog or a cat.

Sophie went back to the living room. Another door led to a tiny bedroom. On the floor next to the bed there were a couple of blankets in a thick bundle. Sophie discovered some golden hairs on the blankets. Here was the evidence! Now Sophie knew that the occupants of the cabin were Alberto Knox and Hermes.

Back in the living room, Sophie stood in front of the mirror. The glass was matte and scratched, and her reflection correspondingly blurred. Sophie began to make faces at herself like she did at home in the bathroom. Her reflection did exactly the same, which was only to be expected.

But all of a sudden something scary happened. Just once—in the space of a split second—Sophie saw quite clearly that the girl in the mirror winked with both eyes. Sophie started back in fright. If she herself had winked—how could she have seen the other girl wink? And not only that, it seemed as though the other girl had winked at Sophie as if to say: I can see you, Sophie. I am in here, on the other side.

Sophie felt her heart beating, and at the same time she heard a dog barking in the distance.

Hermes! She had to get out of here at once. Then she noticed a green wallet on the chest of drawers under the mirror. It contained a hundred-crown note, a fifty, and a school I.D. card. It showed a picture of a girl with fair hair. Under the picture was the girl's name: Hilde Moller Knag ...

Sophie shivered. Again she heard the dog bark. She had to get out, at once!

As she hurried past the table she noticed a white envelope between all the books and the pile of paper. It had one word written on it: SOPHIE.

Before she had time to realize what she was doing, she grabbed the envelope and stuffed it into the brown envelope with the Plato pages. Then she rushed out of the door and slammed it behind her.

The barking was getting closer. But worst of all was that the boat was gone. After a second or two she saw it, adrift halfway across the lake. One of the oars was floating beside it. All because

she hadn't been able to pull it completely up on land. She heard the dog barking quite nearby now and saw movements between the trees on the other side of the lake.

Sophie didn't hesitate any longer. With the big envelope in her hand, she plunged into the bushes behind the cabin. Soon she was having to wade through marshy ground, sinking in several times to well above her ankles. But she had to keep going. She had to get home.

Presently she stumbled onto a path. Was it the path she had taken earlier? She stopped to wring out her dress. And then she began to cry.

How could she have been so stupid? The worst of all was the boat. She couldn't forget the sight of the row-boat with the one oar drifting helplessly on the lake. It was all so embarrassing, so shameful. . .

The philosophy teacher had probably reached the lake by now. He would need the boat to get home. Sophie felt almost like a criminal. But she hadn't done it on purpose.

The envelope! That was probably even worse. Why had she taken it? Because her name was on it, of course, so in a way it was hers. But even so, she felt like a thief. And what's more, she had provided the evidence that it was she who had been there.

Sophie drew the note out of the envelope. It said:

What came first—the chicken or the “idea” chicken ?

Are we born with innate “ideas”? What is the difference between a plant, an animal, and a human?

Why does it rain?

What does it take to live a good life?

Sophie couldn't possibly think about these questions right now, but she assumed they had something to do with the next philosopher. Wasn't he called Aristotle?

When she finally saw the hedge after running so far through the woods it was like swimming ashore after a shipwreck. The hedge looked funny from the other side.

She didn't look at her watch until she had crawled into the den.

It was ten-thirty. She put the big envelope into the biscuit tin with the other papers and stuffed the note with the new questions down her tights.

Her mother was on the telephone when she came in. When she saw Sophie she hung up quickly. "Where on earth have you been?"

"I... went for a walk ... in the woods," she stammered. "So I see."

Sophie stood silently, watching the water dripping from her dress. "I called Joanna..."

"Joanna?"

Her mother brought her some dry clothes. Sophie only just managed to hide the philosopher's note. Then they sat together in the kitchen, and her mother made some hot chocolate.

"Were you with him?" she asked after a while. "Him?"

Sophie could only think about her philosophy teacher. "With him, yes. Him.... your rabbit!"

Sophie shook her head.

"What do you do when you're together, Sophie? Why are you so wet?"

Sophie sat staring gravely at the table. But deep down inside she was laughing. Poor Mom, now she had that to worry about.

She shook her head again. Then more questions came raining down on her.

"Now I want the truth. Were you out all night? Why did you go to bed with your clothes on? Did you sneak out as soon as I had gone to bed? You're only fourteen, Sophie. I demand to know who you are seeing!"

Sophie started to cry. Then she talked. She was still frightened, and when you are frightened you usually talk.

She explained that she had woken up very early and had gone for a walk in the woods. She told her mother about the cabin and the boat, and about the mysterious mirror. But she mentioned nothing about the secret correspondence course. Neither did she mention the green wallet. She didn't quite know why, but she had to keep Hilde for herself.

Her mother put her arms around Sophie, and Sophie knew that her mother believed her now. "I don't have a boyfriend," Sophie

sniffed. “It was just something I said because you were so upset about the white rabbit.”

“And you really went all the way to the major’s cabin ...” said her mother thoughtfully. “The major’s cabin?” Sophie stared at her mother.

“The little woodland cabin is called the major’s cabin because some years ago an army major lived there for a time. He was rather eccentric, a little crazy, I think. But never mind that. Since then the cabin has been unoccupied.”

“But it isn’t! There’s a philosopher living there now.” “Oh stop, don’t start fantasizing again!”

Sophie stayed in her room, thinking about what had happened. Her head felt like a roaring circus full of lumbering elephants, silly clowns, daring trapeze flyers, and trained monkeys. But one image recurred unceasingly— a small rowboat with one oar drifting in a lake deep in the woods—and someone needing the boat to get home.

She felt sure that the philosophy teacher didn’t wish her any harm, and would certainly forgive her if he knew she had been to his cabin. But she had broken an agreement. That was all the thanks he got for taking on her philosophic education. How could she make up for it? Sophie took out her pink notepaper and began to write:

Dear Philosopher, It was me who was in your cabin early Sunday morning. I wanted so much to meet you and discuss some of the philosophic problems. For the moment I am a Plato fan, but I am not so sure he was right about ideas or pattern pictures existing in another reality. Of course they exist in our souls, but I think—for the moment anyway— that this is a different thing. I have to admit too that I am not altogether convinced of the immortality of the soul. Personally, I have no recollections from my former lives. If you could convince me that my deceased grandmother’s soul is happy in the world of ideas, I would be most grateful.

Actually, it was not for philosophic reasons that I started to write this letter (which I shall put in a pink envelope with a lump of sugar). I just wanted to say I was sorry for being disobedient. I tried to pull the boat completely up on shore but I was obviously not strong enough. Or perhaps a big wave dragged the boat out again.

I hope you managed to get home without getting your feet wet.

If not, it might comfort you to know that I got soaked and will probably have a terrible cold. But that'll be my own fault.

I didn't touch anything in the cabin, but I am sorry to say that I couldn't resist the temptation to take the envelope that was on the table. It wasn't because I wanted to steal anything, but as my name was on it, I thought in my confusion that it belonged to me. I am really and truly sorry, and I promise never to disappoint you again.

P.S. I will think all the new questions through very carefully, starting now.

P.P.S. Is the mirror with the brass frame above the white chest of drawers an ordinary mirror or a magic mirror? I'm only asking because I am not used to seeing my own reflection wink with both eyes.

With regards from your sincerely interested pupil, SOPHIE

Sophie read the letter through twice before she put it in the envelope. She thought it was less formal than the previous letter she had written. Before she went downstairs to the kitchen to get a lump of sugar she looked at the note with the day's questions:

"What came first—the chicken or the "idea" chicken?

This question was just as tricky as the old riddle of the chicken and the egg. There would be no chicken without the egg, and no egg without the chicken. Was it really just as complicated to figure out whether the chicken or the "idea" chicken came first? Sophie understood what Plato meant. He meant that the "idea" chicken had existed in the world of ideas long before chickens existed in the sensory world. According to Plato, the soul had "seen" the "idea" chicken before it took up residence in a body. But wasn't this just where Sophie thought Plato must be mistaken? How could a person who had never seen a live chicken or a picture of a chicken ever have any "idea" of a chicken? Which brought her to the next question:

Are we born with innate "ideas"? Most unlikely, thought Sophie. She could hardly imagine a newborn baby being especially well equipped with ideas. One could obviously never be sure, because the fact that the baby had no language did not necessarily mean that it had no ideas in its head. But surely we have to see things in the world before we can know anything about them.

“What is the difference between a plant, an animal, and a human?” Sophie could immediately see very clear differences.

For instance, she did not think a plant had a very complicated emotional life. Who had ever heard of a bluebell with a broken heart? A plant grows, takes nourishment, and produces seeds so that it can reproduce itself. That’s about all one could say about plants. Sophie concluded that everything that applied to plants also applied to animals and humans. But animals had other attributes as well. They could move, for example. (When did a rose ever run a marathon?) It was a bit harder to point to any differences between animals and humans. Humans could think, but couldn’t animals do so as well?

Sophie was convinced that her cat Sherekan could think. At least, it could be very calculating. But could it reflect on philosophical questions? Could a cat speculate about the difference between a plant, an animal, and a human? Hardly! A cat could probably be either contented or unhappy, but did it ever ask itself if there was a God or whether it had an immortal soul? Sophie thought that was extremely doubtful. But the same problem was raised here as with the baby and the innate ideas. It was just as difficult to talk to a cat about such questions as it would be to discuss them with a baby.

“Why does it rain?” Sophie shrugged her shoulders. It probably rains because seawater evaporates and the clouds condense into raindrops. Hadn’t she learnt that in the third grade? Of course, one could always say that it rains so that plants and animals can grow. But was that true? Had a shower any actual purpose?

The last question definitely had something to do with purpose: “What does it take to live a good life?”

The philosopher had written something about this quite early on in the course. Everybody needs food, warmth, love, and care. Such basics were the primary condition for a good life, at any rate. Then he had pointed out that people also needed to find answers to certain philosophical questions. It was probably also quite important to have a job you liked. If you hated traffic, for instance, you would not be very happy as a taxi driver. And if you hated doing homework it would probably be a bad idea to become a teacher. Sophie loved

animals and wanted to be a vet. But in any case she didn't think it was necessary to win a million in the lottery to live a good life.

Quite the opposite, more likely. There was a saying: The devil finds work for idle hands.

Sophie stayed in her room until her mother called her down to a big midday meal. She had prepared sirloin steak and baked potatoes. There were cloudberry and cream for dessert.

They talked about all kinds of things. Sophie's mother asked her how she wanted to celebrate her fifteenth birthday. It was only a few weeks away.

Sophie shrugged.

"Aren't you going to invite anyone? I mean, don't you want to have a party?" "Maybe."

"We could ask Martha and Anne Marie ... and Helen. And Joanna, of course. And Jeremy, perhaps. But that's for you to decide. I remember my own fifteenth birthday so clearly, you know. It doesn't seem all that long ago. I felt I was already quite grown up. Isn't it odd, Sophie! I don't feel I have changed at all since then."

"You haven't. Nothing changes. You have just developed, gotten older..."

"Mm ... that was a very grownup thing to say. I just think it's all happened so very quickly."

Aristotle

...a meticulous organizer who
wanted to clarify our concepts ...

While her mother was taking her afternoon nap, Sophie went down to the den. She had put a lump of sugar in the pink envelope and written "To Alberto" on the outside.

There was no new letter, but after a few minutes Sophie heard the dog approaching.

"Hermes!" she called, and the next moment he had pushed his way into the den with a big brown envelope in his mouth.

"Good boy!" Sophie put her arm around the dog, which was snorting and snuffling like a walrus. She took the pink envelope with the lump of sugar and put it in the dog's mouth. He crawled through the hedge and made off into the woods again.

Sophie opened the big envelope apprehensively, wondering whether it would contain anything about the cabin and the boat.

It contained the usual typed pages held together with a paperclip. But there was also a loose page inside. On it was written:

Dear Miss Sleuth, or, to be more exact, Miss Burglar. The case has already been handed over to the police.

Not really. No, I'm not angry. If you are just as curious when it comes to discovering answers to the riddles of

philosophy, I'd say your adventure was very promising. It's just a little annoying that I'll have to move now. Still, I have no one to blame but myself, I suppose. I might have known you were a person who would always want to get to the bottom of things.

Greetings, Alberto

Sophie was relieved. So he was not angry after all. But why would he have to move?

She took the papers and ran up to her room. It would be prudent to be in the house when her mother woke up. Lying comfortably on her bed, she began to read about Aristotle.

PHILOSOPHER AND SCIENTIST

Dear Sophie:

You were probably astonished by Plato's theory or ideas. You are not the only one! I do not know whether you swallowed the whole thing—hook, line, and sinker—or whether you had any critical comments. But if you did have, you can be sure that the self-same criticism was raised by Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), who was a pupil at Plato's Academy for almost twenty years.

Aristotle was not a native of Athens. He was born in Macedonia and came to Plato's Academy when Plato was 61. Aristotle's father was a respected physician— and therefore a scientist. This background already tells us something about Aristotle's philosophic project.

What he was most interested in was nature study. He was not only the last of the great Greek philosophers, he was Europe's first great biologist.

Taking it to extremes, we could say that Plato was so engrossed in his eternal forms, or "ideas," that he took very little notice of the changes in nature. Aristotle, on the other hand, was preoccupied with just these changes—or with what we nowadays describe as natural processes.

To exaggerate even more, we could say that Plato turned his back on the sensory world and shut his eyes to everything we see around us. (He wanted to escape from the cave and look out over the

eternal world of ideas!) Aristotle did the opposite: he got down on all fours and studied frogs and fish, anemones and poppies.

While Plato used his reason, Aristotle used his senses as well.

We find decisive differences between the two, not least in their writing. Plato was a poet and mythologist; Aristotle's writings were as dry and precise as an encyclopedia. On the other hand, much of what he wrote was based on up-to-the-minute field studies.

Records from antiquity refer to 170 titles supposedly written by Aristotle. Of these, 47 are preserved. These are not complete books; they consist largely of lecture notes. In his time, philosophy was still mainly an oral activity.

The significance of Aristotle in European culture is due not least to the fact that he created the terminology that scientists use today. He was the great organizer who founded and classified the various sciences.

Since Aristotle wrote on all the sciences, I will limit myself to some of the most important areas. Now that I have told you such a lot about Plato, you must start by hearing how Aristotle refuted Plato's theory of ideas. Later we will look at the way he formulated his own natural philosophy, since it was Aristotle who summed up what the natural philosophers before him had said. We'll see how he categorizes our concepts and founds the discipline of Logic as a science. And finally I'll tell you a little about Aristotle's view of man and society.

No Innate Ideas

Like the philosophers before him, Plato wanted to find the eternal and immutable in the midst of all change. So he found the perfect ideas that were superior to the sensory world.

Plato furthermore held that ideas were more real than all the phenomena of nature. First came the idea "horse," then came all the sensory world's horses trotting along like shadows on a cave wall. The idea "chicken" came before both the chicken and the egg.

Aristotle thought Plato had turned the whole thing upside down. He agreed with his teacher that the particular horse "flows" and that no horse lives forever. He also agreed that the actual form

of the horse is eternal and immutable. But the “idea” horse was simply a concept that we humans had formed after seeing a certain number of horses. The “idea” or “form” horse thus had no existence of its own. To Aristotle, the “idea” or the “form” horse was made up of the horse’s characteristics—which define what we today call the horse species.

To be more precise: by “form” horse, Aristotle meant that which is common to all horses.

And here the metaphor of the gingerbread mold does not hold up because the mold exists independently of the particular gingerbread cookies. Aristotle did not believe in the existence of any such molds or forms that, as it were, lay on their own shelf beyond the natural world. On the contrary, to Aristotle the “forms” were in the things, because they were the particular characteristics of these things.

So Aristotle disagreed with Plato that the “idea” chicken came before the chicken. What Aristotle called the “form” chicken is present in every single chicken as the chicken’s particular set characteristics—for one, that it lays eggs. The real chicken and the “form” chicken are thus just as inseparable as body and soul.

And that is really the essence of Aristotle’s criticism of Plato’s theory of ideas. But you should not ignore the fact that this was a dramatic turn of thought. The highest degree of reality, in Plato’s theory, was that which we think with our reason. It was equally apparent to Aristotle that the highest degree of reality is that which we perceive with our senses. Plato thought that all the things we see in the natural world were purely reflections of things that existed in the higher reality of the world of ideas—and thereby in the human soul. Aristotle thought the opposite: things that are in the human soul were purely reflections of natural objects. So nature is the real world. According to Aristotle, Plato was trapped in a mythical world picture in which the human imagination was confused with the real world.

Aristotle pointed out that nothing exists in consciousness that has not first been experienced by the senses. Plato would have said that there is nothing in the natural world that has not first existed in the world of ideas. Aristotle held that Plato was thus “doubling the

number of things.” He explained a horse by referring to the “idea” horse. But what kind of an explanation is that, Sophie? Where does the “idea” horse come from, is my question. Might there not even be a third horse, which the “idea” horse is just an imitation of?

Aristotle held that all our thoughts and ideas have come into our consciousness through what we have heard and seen. But we also have an innate power of reason. We have no innate ideas, as Plato held, but we have the innate faculty of organizing all sensory impressions into categories and classes. This is how concepts such as “stone,” “plant,” “animal,” and “human” arise. Similarly there arise concepts like “horse,” “lobster,” and “canary.”

Aristotle did not deny that humans have innate reason. On the contrary, it is precisely reason, according to Aristotle, that is man’s most distinguishing characteristic. But our reason is completely empty until we have sensed something. So man has no innate “ideas.”

The Form of a Thing Is Its Specific Characteristics

Having come to terms with Plato’s theory of ideas, Aristotle decided that reality consisted of various separate things that constitute a unity of form and substance. The “substance” is what things are made of, while the “form” is each thing’s specific characteristics.

A chicken is fluttering about in front of you, Sophie. The chicken’s “form” is precisely that it flutters—and that it cackles and lays eggs. So by the “form” of a chicken, we mean the specific characteristics of its species—or in other words, what it does. When the chicken dies—and cackles no more—its “form” ceases to exist. The only thing that remains is the chicken’s “substance” (sadly enough, Sophie), but then it is no longer a chicken.

As I said earlier, Aristotle was concerned with the changes in nature. “Substance” always contains the potentiality to realize a specific “form.” We could say that “substance” always strives toward achieving an innate potentiality. Every change in nature, according to Aristotle, is a transformation of substance from the “potential” to the “actual.”

Yes, I’ll explain what I mean, Sophie. See if this funny story

helps you. A sculptor is working on a large block of granite. He hacks away at the formless block every day. One day a little boy comes by and says, “What are you looking for?”

“Wait and see,” answers the sculptor. After a few days the little boy comes back, and now the sculptor has carved a beautiful horse out of the granite. The boy stares at it in amazement, then he turns to the sculptor and says, “How did you know it was in there?”

How indeed! In a sense, the sculptor had seen the horse’s form in the block of granite, because that particular block of granite had the potentiality to be formed into the shape of a horse. Similarly Aristotle believed that everything in nature has the potentiality of realizing, or achieving, a specific “form.”

Let us return to the chicken and the egg. A chicken’s egg has the potentiality to become a chicken. This does not mean that all chicken’s eggs become chickens—many of them end up on the breakfast table as fried eggs, omelettes, or scrambled eggs, without ever having realized their potentiality. But it is equally obvious that a chicken’s egg cannot become a goose. That potentiality is not within a chicken’s egg. The “form” of a thing, then, says something about its limitation as well as its potentiality.

When Aristotle talks about the “substance” and “form” of things, he does not only refer to living organisms. Just as it is the chicken’s “form” to cackle, flutter its wings, and lay eggs, it is the form of the stone to fall to the ground. Just as the chicken cannot help cackling, the stone cannot help falling to the ground. You can, of course, lift a stone and hurl it high into the air, but because it is the stone’s nature to fall to the ground, you cannot hurl it to the moon. (Take care when you perform this experiment, because the stone might take revenge and find the shortest route back to the earth!)

The Final Cause

Before we leave the subject of all living and dead things having a “form” that says something about their potential “action,” I must add that Aristotle had a remarkable view of causality in nature.

Today when we talk about the “cause” of anything, we mean

how it came to happen. The windowpane was smashed because Peter hurled a stone through it; a shoe is made because the shoemaker sews pieces of leather together. But Aristotle held that there were different types of cause in nature. Altogether he named four different causes. It is important to understand what he meant by what he called the “final cause.”

In the case of window smashing, it is quite reasonable to ask why Peter threw the stone. We are thus asking what his purpose was. There can be no doubt that purpose played a role, also, in the matter of the shoe being made. But Aristotle also took into account a similar “purpose” when considering the purely lifeless processes in nature. Here’s an example:

Why does it rain, Sophie? You have probably learned at school that it rains because the moisture in the clouds cools and condenses into raindrops that are drawn to the earth by the force of gravity. Aristotle would have nodded in agreement. But he would have added that so far you have only mentioned three of the causes. The “material cause” is that the moisture (the clouds) was there at the precise moment when the air cooled. The “efficient cause” is that the moisture cools, and the “formal cause” is that the “form,” or nature of the water, is to fall to the earth. But if you stopped there, Aristotle would add that it rains because plants and animals need rainwater in order to grow. This he called the “final cause.” Aristotle assigns the raindrops a life-task, or “purpose.”

We would probably turn the whole thing upside down and say that plants grow because they find moisture. You can see the difference, can’t you, Sophie? Aristotle believed that there is a purpose behind everything in nature. It rains so that plants can grow; oranges and grapes grow so that people can eat them.

That is not the nature of scientific reasoning today. We say that food and water are necessary conditions of life for man and beast. Had we not had these conditions we would not have existed. But it is not the purpose of water or oranges to be food for us.

In the question of causality then, we are tempted to say that Aristotle was wrong. But let us not be too hasty. Many people believe that God created the world as it is so that all His creatures could live in it. Viewed in this way, it can naturally be claimed that

there is water in the rivers because animals and humans need water to live. But now we are talking about God's purpose. The raindrops and the waters of the river have no interest in our welfare.

Logic

The distinction between “form” and “substance” plays an important part in Aristotle's explanation of the way we discern things in the world.

When we discern things, we classify them in various groups or categories. I see a horse, then I see another horse, and another. The horses are not exactly alike, but they have something in common, and this common something is the horse's “form.” Whatever might be distinctive, or individual, belongs to the horse's “substance.”

So we go around pigeonholing everything. We put cows in cowsheds, horses in stables, pigs in pigsties, and chickens in chicken coops. The same happens when Sophie Amundsen tidies up her room. She puts her books on the bookshelf, her schoolbooks in her schoolbag, and her magazines in the drawer. Then she folds her clothes neatly and puts them in the closet—underwear on one shelf, sweaters on another, and socks in a drawer on their own.

Notice that we do the same thing in our minds. We distinguish between things made of stone, things made of wool, and things made of rubber. We distinguish between things that are alive or dead, and we distinguish between vegetable, animal, and human.

Do you see, Sophie? Aristotle wanted to do a thorough clearing up in nature's “room.” He tried to show that everything in nature belongs to different categories and subcategories. (Hermes is a live creature, more specifically an animal, more specifically a vertebrate, more specifically a mammal, more specifically a dog, more specifically a Labrador, more specifically a male Labrador.)

Go into your room, Sophie. Pick up something, anything, from the floor. Whatever you take, you will find that what you are holding belongs to a higher category. The day you see something you are unable to classify you will get a shock. If, for example, you discover a small whatsit, and you can't really say whether it is animal, vegetable, or mineral—I don't think you would dare touch it.

Saying animal, vegetable, and mineral reminds me of that party game where the victim is sent outside the room, and when he comes in again he has to guess what everyone else is thinking of. Everyone has agreed to think of Fluffy, the cat, which at the moment is in the neighbor's garden. The victim comes in and begins to guess. The others must only answer "yes" or "no." If the victim is a good Aristotelian—and therefore no victim—the game could go pretty much as follows:

Is it concrete? (Yes!) Mineral? (No!) Is it alive? (Yes!) Vegetable? (No!) Animal? (Yes!) Is it a bird? (No!) Is it a mammal? (Yes!) Is it the whole animal? (Yes!) Is it a cat? (Yes!) Is it Fluffy? (Yeah! Laughter. . .)

So Aristotle invented that game. We ought to give Plato the credit for having invented hide-and-seek. Democritus has already been credited with having invented Lego.

Aristotle was a meticulous organizer who set out to clarify our concepts. In fact, he founded the science of Logic. He demonstrated a number of laws governing conclusions or proofs that were valid. One example will suffice. If I first establish that "all living creatures are mortal" (first premise), and then establish that "Hermes is a living creature" (second premise), I can then elegantly conclude that "Hermes is mortal."

The example demonstrates that Aristotle's logic was based on the correlation of terms, in this case "living creature" and "mortal." Even though one has to admit that the above conclusion is 100% valid, we may also add that it hardly tells us anything new. We already knew that Hermes was "mortal." (He is a "dog" and all dogs are "living creatures"—which are "mortal," unlike the rock of Mount Everest.) Certainly we knew that, Sophie. But the relationship between classes of things is not always so obvious. From time to time it can be necessary to clarify our concepts.

For example: Is it really possible that tiny little baby mice suckle just like lambs and piglets? Mice certainly do not lay eggs. (When did I last see a mouse's egg?) So they give birth to live young—just like pigs and sheep. But we call animals that bear live young mammals— and mammals are animals that feed on their mother's milk. So—we got there. We had the answer inside us but

we had to think it through. We forgot for the moment that mice really do suckle from their mother. Perhaps it was because we have never seen a baby mouse being suckled, for the simple reason that mice are rather shy of humans when they suckle their young.

Nature's Scale

When Aristotle “clears up” in life, he first of all points out that everything in the natural world can be divided into two main categories. On the one hand there are nonliving things, such as stones, drops of water, or clumps of soil. These things have no potentiality for change. According to Aristotle, nonliving things can only change through external influence. Only living things have the potentiality for change.

Aristotle divides “living things” into two different categories. One comprises plants, and the other creatures. Finally, these “creatures” can also be divided into two subcategories, namely animals and humans.

You have to admit that Aristotle’s categories are clear and simple. There is a decisive difference between a living and a nonliving thing, for example a rose and a stone, just as there is a decisive difference between a plant and an animal, for example a rose and a horse. I would also claim that there definitely is a difference between a horse and a man. But what exactly does this difference consist of? Can you tell me that?

Unfortunately I do not have time to wait while you write the answer down and put it in a pink envelope with a lump of sugar, so I’ll answer myself. When Aristotle divides natural phenomena into various categories, his criterion is the object’s characteristics, or more specifically what it can do or what it does.

All living things (plants, animals, humans) have the ability to absorb nourishment, to grow, and to propagate. All “living creatures” (animals and humans) have in addition the ability to perceive the world around them and to move about. Moreover, all humans have the ability to think—or otherwise to order their perceptions into various categories and classes.

So there are in reality no sharp boundaries in the natural

world. We observe a gradual transition from simple growths to more complicated plants, from simple animals to more complicated animals. At the top of this “scale” is man—who according to Aristotle lives the whole life of nature. Man grows and absorbs nourishment like plants, he has feelings and the ability to move like animals, but he also has a specific characteristic peculiar to humans, and that is the ability to think rationally.

Therefore, man has a spark of divine reason, Sophie. Yes, I did say divine. From time to time Aristotle reminds us that there must be a God who started all movement in the natural world. Therefore God must be at the very top of nature’s scale.

Aristotle imagined the movement of the stars and the planets guiding all movement on Earth. But there had to be something causing the heavenly bodies to move. Aristotle called this the “first mover,” or “God.” The “first mover” is itself at rest, but it is the “formal cause” of the movement of the heavenly bodies, and thus of all movement in nature.

Ethics

Let us go back to man, Sophie. According to Aristotle, man’s “form” comprises a soul, which has a plant-like part, an animal part, and a rational part. And now he asks: How should we live? What does it require to live a good life? His answer: Man can only achieve happiness by using all his abilities and capabilities.

Aristotle held that there are three forms of happiness. The first form of happiness is a life of pleasure and enjoyment. The second form of happiness is a life as a free and responsible citizen. The third form of happiness is a life as thinker and philosopher.

Aristotle then emphasized that all three criteria must be present at the same time for man to find happiness and fulfillment. He rejected all forms of imbalance. Had he lived today he might have said that a person who only develops his body lives a life that is just as unbalanced as someone who only uses his head. Both extremes are an expression of a warped way of life.

The same applies in human relationships, where Aristotle advocated the “Golden Mean.” We must be neither cowardly nor

rash, but courageous (too little courage is cowardice, too much is rashness), neither miserly nor extravagant but liberal (not liberal enough is miserly, too liberal is extravagant). The same goes for eating. It is dangerous to eat too little, but also dangerous to eat too much. The ethics of both Plato and Aristotle contain echoes of Greek medicine: only by exercising balance and temperance will I achieve a happy or “harmonious” life.

Politics

The undesirability of cultivating extremes is also expressed in Aristotle’s view of society. He says that man is by nature a “political animal.” Without a society around us, we are not real people, he claimed. He pointed out that the family and the village satisfy our primary needs of food, warmth, marriage, and child rearing. But the highest form of human fellowship is only to be found in the state.

This leads to the question of how the state should be organized. (You remember Plato’s “philosophic state”?) Aristotle describes three good forms of constitution.

One is monarchy, or kingship—which means there is only one head of state. For this type of constitution to be good, it must not degenerate into “tyranny”—that is, when one ruler governs the state to his own advantage. Another good form of constitution is aristocracy, in which there is a larger or smaller group of rulers. This constitutional form must beware of degenerating into an “oligarchy”—when the government is run by a few people. An example of that would be a junta. The third good constitutional form is what Aristotle called polity, which means democracy. But this form also has its negative aspect. A democracy can quickly develop into mob rule. (Even if the tyrannic Hitler had not become head of state in Germany, all the lesser Nazis could have formed a terrifying mob rule.)

Views on Women

Finally, let us look at Aristotle’s views on women. His was unfortunately not as uplifting as Plato’s. Aristotle was more inclined

to believe that women were incomplete in some way. A woman was an “unfinished man.” In reproduction, woman is passive and receptive whilst man is active and productive; for the child inherits only the male characteristics, claimed Aristotle.

He believed that all the child’s characteristics lay complete in the male sperm. The woman was the soil, receiving and bringing forth the seed, whilst the man was the “sower.” Or, in Aristotelian language, the man provides the “form” and the woman contributes the “substance.”

It is of course both astonishing and highly regrettable that an otherwise so intelligent man could be so wrong about the relationship of the sexes. But it demonstrates two things: first, that Aristotle could not have had much practical experience regarding the lives of women and children, and second, it shows how wrong things can go when men are allowed to reign supreme in the fields of philosophy and science.

Aristotle’s erroneous view of the sexes was doubly harmful because it was his—rather than Plato’s—view that held sway throughout the Middle Ages. The church thus inherited a view of women that is entirely without foundation in the Bible. Jesus was certainly no woman hater!

I’ll say no more. But you will be hearing from me again.

When Sophie had read the chapter on Aristotle one and a half times, she returned it to the brown envelope and remained sitting, staring into space. She suddenly became aware of the mess surrounding her. Books and ring binders lay scattered on the floor. Socks and sweaters, tights and jeans hung half out of the closet. On the chair in front of the writing desk was a huge pile of dirty laundry.

Sophie had an irresistible desire to clear up. The first thing she did was to pull all the clothes out of the closet and onto the floor. It was necessary to start all over. Then she began folding her things very neatly and stacking them all tidily on the shelves. The closet had seven shelves. One was for underwear, one for socks and tights, and one for jeans. She gradually filled up each shelf. She never had any question about where to put anything. Dirty laundry went into a plastic bag she found on the bottom shelf. One thing she did have trouble with—a white knee-length stocking. The problem was that

the other one of the pair was missing. What's more, it had never been Sophie's.

She examined it carefully. There was nothing to identify the owner, but Sophie had a strong suspicion about who the owner was. She threw it up onto the top shelf to join the Lego, the video cassette, and the red silk scarf.

Sophie turned her attention to the floor. She sorted books, ring binders, magazines, and posters— exactly as the philosophy teacher had described in the chapter on Aristotle. When she had done that, she made her bed and got started on her writing desk.

The last thing she did was to gather all the pages on Aristotle into a neat pile. She fished out an empty ring binder and a hole punch, made holes in the pages, and clipped them into the ring binder. This also went onto the top shelf. Later on in the day she would have to bring in the cookie tin from the den.

From now on things would be kept neat. And she didn't only mean in her room. After reading Aristotle, she realized it was just as important to keep her ideas orderly. She had reserved the top shelf of the closet especially for that kind of thing. It was the only place in the room that she did not yet have complete control over.

There had been no sign of life from her mother for over two hours. Sophie went downstairs.

Before she woke her mother up she decided to feed her pets.

She bent over the goldfish bowl in the kitchen. One of the fishes was black, one orange, and one red and white. This was why she called them Black Jack, Gold-top, and Red Ridinghood.

As she sprinkled fish food into the water she said:

“You belong to Nature's living creatures, you can absorb nourishment, you can grow and reproduce yourselves. More specifically, you belong to the animal kingdom. So you can move around and look out at the world. To be precise, you are fish, and you breathe through your gills and can swim back and forth in the waters of life.”

Sophie put the lid back on the fish food jar. She was quite satisfied with the way she had placed the goldfish in Nature's scale, and she was especially pleased with the expression “the waters of life.” So now it was the budgerigars' turn.

Sophie poured a little birdseed in their feeding cup and said:

“Dear Smit and Smule. You have become dear little budgerigars because you grew out of dear little budgerigar eggs, and because these eggs had the form of being budgerigars, luckily you didn’t grow into squawking parrots.”

Sophie then went into the large bathroom, where the sluggish tortoise lay in a big box. Every now and then when her mother showered, she yelled that she would kill it one day. But so far it had been an empty threat. Sophie took a lettuce leaf from a large jam jar and laid it in the box.

“Dear Govinda,” she said. “You are not one of the speediest animals, but you certainly are able to sense a tiny fraction of the great big world we live in. You’ll have to content yourself with the fact that you are not the only one who can’t exceed your own limits.”

Sherekan was probably out catching mice—that was a cat’s nature, after all. Sophie crossed the living room toward her mother’s bedroom. A vase of daffodils stood on the coffee table. It was as if the yellow blooms bowed respectfully as Sophie went by. She stopped for a moment and let her fingers gently brush their smooth heads. “You belong to the living part of nature too,” she said. “Actually, you are quite privileged compared to the vase you are in. But unfortunately you are not able to appreciate it.”

Then Sophie tiptoed into her mother’s bedroom. Although her mother was in a deep sleep, Sophie laid a hand on her forehead.

“You are one of the luckiest ones,” she said, “because you are not only alive like the lilies of the field. And you are not only a living creature like Sherekan or Govinda. You are a human, and therefore have the rare capacity of thought.”

“What on earth are you talking about, Sophie?” Her mother had woken up more quickly than usual.

“I was just saying that you look like a lazy tortoise. I can otherwise inform you that I have tidied up my room, with philosophic thoroughness.”

Her mother lifted her head.

“I’ll be right there,” she said. “Will you put the coffee on?”

Sophie did as she was asked, and they were soon sitting in the kitchen over coffee, juice, and chocolate.

Suddenly Sophie said, "Have you ever wondered why we are alive, Mom?" "Oh, not again!"

"Yes, because now I know the answer. People live on this planet so that someone can go around giving names to everything."

"Is that right? I never thought of that."

"Then you have a big problem, because a human is a thinking animal. If you don't think, you're not really a human."

"Sophie!"

"Imagine if there were only vegetables and animals. Then there wouldn't have been anybody to tell the difference between 'cat' and 'dog,' or 'lily' and 'gooseberry.' Vegetables and animals are living too, but we are the only creatures that can categorize nature into different groups and classes."

"You really are the most peculiar girl I have ever had," said her mother.

"I should hope so," said Sophie. "Everybody is more or less peculiar. I am a person, so I am more or less peculiar. You have only one girl, so I am the most peculiar."

"What I meant was that you scare the living daylights out of me with all that new talk." "You are easily scared, then."

Later that afternoon Sophie went back to the den. She managed to smuggle the big cookie tin up to her room without her mother noticing.

First she put all the pages in the right order. Then she punched holes in them and put them in the ring binder, before the chapter on Aristotle. Finally she numbered each page in the top right-hand corner. There were in all over fifty pages. Sophie was in the process of compiling her own book on philosophy. It was not by her, but written especially for her.

She had no time to do her homework for Monday. They were probably going to have a test in Religious Knowledge, but the teacher always said he valued personal commitment and value judgments. Sophie felt she was beginning to have a certain basis for both.

Hellenism

... a spark from the fire...

Although the philosophy teacher had begun sending his letters directly to the old hedge, Sophie nevertheless looked in the mailbox on Monday morning, more out of habit than anything else.

It was empty, not surprisingly. She began to walk down Clover Close.

Suddenly she noticed a photograph lying on the sidewalk. It was a picture of a white jeep and a blue flag with the letters UN on it. Wasn't that the United Nations flag?

Sophie turned the picture over and saw that it was a regular postcard. To "Hilde Moller Knag, c/o Sophie Amundsen ..." It had a Norwegian stamp and was postmarked "UN Battalion" Friday June 15, 1990.

June 15! That was Sofie's birthday!

The card read:

Dear Hilde,

I assume you are still celebrating your 15th birthday. Or is this the morning after?

Anyway, it makes no difference to your present. In a sense, that will last a lifetime. But I'd like to wish you a happy birthday one more time. Perhaps you understand now why I send the cards to Sophie. I am sure she will pass them on to you.

P.S. Mom said you had lost your wallet. I hereby promise to reimburse you the 150 crowns. You will probably be able to get another school I.D. before they close for the summer vacation.

Love from Dad.

Sophie stood glued to the spot. When was the previous card postmarked? She seemed to recall that the postcard of the beach was also postmarked June—even though it was a whole month off. She simply hadn't looked properly.

She glanced at her watch and then ran back to the house. She would just have to be late for school today!

Sophie let herself in and leaped upstairs to her room. She found the first postcard to Hilde under the red silk scarf. Yes! It was also postmarked June 15! Sophie's birthday and the day before the summer vacation.

Her mind was racing as she ran over to the supermarket to meet Joanna.

Who was Hilde? How could her father as good as take it for granted that Sophie would find her?

In any case, it was senseless of him to send Sophie the cards instead of sending them directly to his daughter. It could not possibly be because he didn't know his own daughter's address. Was it a practical joke? Was he trying to surprise his daughter on her birthday by getting a perfect stranger to play detective and mailman? Was that why she was being given a month's headstart? And was using her as the go-between a way of giving his daughter a new girlfriend as a birthday present? Could she be the present that would "last a lifetime"?

If this joker really was in Lebanon, how had he gotten hold of Sophie's address? Also, Sophie and Hilde had at least two things in common. If Hilde's birthday was June 15, they were both born on the same day. And they both had fathers who were on the other side of the globe.

Sophie felt she was being drawn into an unnatural world. Maybe it was not so dumb after all to believe in fate. Still—she shouldn't be jumping to conclusions; it could all have a perfectly

natural explanation. But how had Alberto Knox found Hilde's wallet when Hilde lived in Lillesand? Lillesand was hundreds of miles away. And why had Sophie found this postcard on her sidewalk? Did it fall out of the mailman's bag just as he got to Sophie's mailbox? If so, why should he drop this particular card?

"Are you completely insane?" Joanna burst out when Sophie finally made it to the supermarket.

"Sorry!"

Joanna frowned at her severely, like a schoolteacher.

"You'd better have a good explanation."

"It has to do with the UN," said Sophie. "I was detained by hostile troops in Lebanon."

"Sure ... You're just in love!"

They ran to school as fast as their legs could carry them.

The Religious Knowledge test that Sophie had not had time to prepare for was given out in the third period. The sheet read:

Philosophy of Life and Tolerance

1. Make a list of things we can know. Then make a list of things we can only believe.
2. Indicate some of the factors contributing to a person's philosophy of life.
3. What is meant by conscience? Do you think conscience is the same for everyone?
4. What is meant by priority of values?

Sophie sat thinking for a long time before she started to write. Could she use any of the ideas she had learned from Alberto Knox? She was going to have to, because she had not opened her Religious Knowledge book for days. Once she began to write, the words simply flowed from her pen.

She wrote that we know the moon is not made of green cheese and that there are also craters on the dark side of the moon, that both Socrates and Jesus were sentenced to death, that everybody has to

die sooner or later, that the great temples on the Acropolis were built after the Persian wars in the fifth century B.C. and that the most important oracle in ancient Greece was the oracle at Delphi. As examples of what we can only believe, Sophie mentioned the questions of whether or not there is life on other planets, whether God exists or not, whether there is life after death, and whether Jesus was the son of God or merely a wise man. "We can certainly not know where the world came from," she wrote, completing her list. "The universe can be compared to a large rabbit pulled out of a top hat. Philosophers try to climb up one of the fine hairs of the rabbit's fur and stare straight into the eyes of the Great Magician. Whether they will ever succeed is an open question. But if each philosopher climbed onto another one's back, they would get even higher up in the rabbit's fur, and then, in my opinion, there would be some chance they would make it some day. P.S. In the Bible there is something that could have been one of the fine hairs of the rabbit's fur. The hair was called the Tower of Babel, and it was destroyed because the Magician didn't want the tiny human insects to crawl up that high out of the white rabbit he had just created."

Then there was the next question: "Indicate some of the factors contributing to a person's philosophy of life." Upbringing and environment were important here. People living at the time of Plato had a different philosophy of life than many people have today because they lived in a different age and a different environment. Another factor was the kind of experience people chose to get themselves.

Common sense was not determined by environment. Everybody had that. Maybe one could compare environment and social situation with the conditions that existed deep down in Plato's cave. By using their intelligence individuals can start to drag themselves up from the darkness. But a journey like that requires personal courage. Socrates is a good example of a person who managed to free himself from the prevailing views of his time by his own intelligence. Finally, she wrote: "Nowadays, people of many lands and cultures are being intermingled more and more. Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists may live in the same apartment building. In which case it is more important to accept each other's

beliefs than to ask why everyone does not believe the same thing.”

Not bad, thought Sophie. She certainly felt she had covered some ground with what she had learned from her philosophy teacher. And she could always supplement it with a dash of her own common sense and what she might have read and heard elsewhere.

She applied herself to the third question: “What is meant by conscience? Do you think conscience is the same for everyone?” This was something they had discussed a lot in class. Sophie wrote: Conscience is people’s ability to respond to right and wrong. My personal opinion is that everyone is endowed with this ability, so in other words, conscience is innate. Socrates would have said the same.

But just what conscience dictates can vary a lot from one person to the next. One could say that the Sophists had a point here. They thought that right and wrong is something mainly determined by the environment the individual grows up in. Socrates, on the other hand, believed that conscience is the same for everyone. Perhaps both views were right. Even if everybody doesn’t feel guilty about showing themselves naked, most people will have a bad conscience if they are really mean to someone. Still, it must be remembered that having a conscience is not the same as using it. Sometimes it looks as if people act quite unscrupulously, but I believe they also have a kind of conscience somewhere, deep down. Just as it seems as if some people have no sense at all, but that’s only because they are not using it. P.S. Common sense and conscience can both be compared to a muscle. If you don’t use a muscle, it gets weaker and weaker.”

Now there was only one question left: “What is meant by priority of values?” This was another thing they had discussed a lot lately. For example, it could be of value to drive a car and get quickly from one place to another. But if driving led to deforestation and polluting the natural environment, you were facing a choice of values. After careful consideration Sophie felt she had come to the conclusion that healthy forests and a pure environment were more valuable than getting to work quickly. She gave several more examples. Finally she wrote: “Personally, I think Philosophy is a more important subject than English Grammar. It would therefore

be a sensible priority of values to have Philosophy on the timetable and cut down a bit on English lessons.”

In the last break the teacher drew Sophie aside.

“I have already read your Religion test,” he said. “It was near the top of the pile.” “I hope it gave you some food for thought.”

“That was exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. It was in many ways very mature.

Surprisingly so. And self-reliant. But had you done your homework, Sophie?” Sophie fidgeted a little.

“Well, you did say it was important to have a personal point of view.” “Well, yes I did ... but there are limits.”

Sophie looked him straight in the eye. She felt she could permit herself this after all she had experienced lately.

“I have started studying philosophy,” she said. “It gives one a good background for personal opinions.”

“But it doesn’t make it easy for me to grade your paper. It will either be a D or an A.” “Because I was either quite right or quite wrong? Is that what you’re saying?”

“So let’s say A,” said the teacher. “But next time, do your homework!”

When Sophie got home from school that afternoon, she flung her schoolbag on the steps and ran down to the den. A brown envelope lay on top of the gnarled roots. It was quite dry around the edges, so it must have been a long time since Hermes had dropped it.

She took the envelope with her and let herself in the front door. She fed the animals and then went upstairs to her room. Lying on her bed, she opened Alberto’s letter and read:

HELLENISM

Here we are again, Sophie! Having read about the natural philosophers and Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, you are now familiar with the foundations of European philosophy. So from now on we will drop the introductory questions which you earlier received in white envelopes. I imagine you probably

have plenty of other assignments and tests at school. I shall now tell you about the long period from Aristotle near the end of the fourth century

B.C. right up to the early Middle Ages around A.D. 400. Notice that we can now write both B.C. and A.D. because Christianity was in fact one of the most important, and the most mysterious, factors of the period.

Aristotle died in the year 322 B.C., at the time when Athens had lost its dominant role.

This was not least due to the political upheavals resulting from the conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.).

Alexander the Great was the King of Macedonia. Aristotle was also from Macedonia, and for a time he was even the young Alexander's tutor. It was Alexander who won the final, decisive victory over the Persians. And moreover, Sophie, with his many conquests he linked both Egypt and the Orient as far east as India to the Greek civilization.

This marked the beginning of a new epoch in the history of mankind. A civilization sprang up in which Greek culture and the Greek language played a leading role. This period, which lasted for about 300 years, is known as Hellenism. The term Hellenism refers to both the period of time and the Greek-dominated culture that prevailed in the three Hellenistic kingdoms of Macedonia, Syria, and Egypt.

However, from about the year 50 B.C., Rome secured the upper hand in military and political affairs. The new superpower gradually conquered all the Hellenistic kingdoms, and from then on Roman culture and the Latin language were predominant from Spain in the west to far into Asia. This was the beginning of the Roman period, which we often refer to as Late Antiquity. But remember one thing—before the Romans managed to conquer the Hellenistic world, Rome itself was a province of Greek culture. So Greek culture and Greek philosophy came to play an important role long after the political influence of the Greeks was a thing of the past.

Religion, Philosophy and Science

Hellenism was characterized by the fact that the borders between the

various countries and cultures became erased. Previously the Greeks, the Romans, the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Syrians, and the Persians had worshipped their own gods within what we generally call a “national religion.” Now the different cultures merged into one great witch’s caldron of religious, philosophical, - and scientific ideas.

We could perhaps say that the town square was replaced by the world arena. The old town square had also buzzed with voices, bringing now different wares to market, now different thoughts and ideas. The new aspect was that town squares were being filled with wares and ideas from all over the world. The voices were buzzing in many different languages.

We have already mentioned that the Greek view of life was now much more widespread than it had been in the former Greek cultural areas. But as time went on, Oriental gods were also worshipped in all the Mediterranean countries. New religious formations arose that could draw on the gods and the beliefs of many of the old nations. This is called syncretism or the fusion of creeds.

Prior to this, people had felt a strong affinity with their own folk and their own city-state. But as the borders and boundaries became erased, many people began to experience doubt and uncertainty about their philosophy of life. Late Antiquity was generally characterized by religious doubts, cultural dissolution, and pessimism. It was said that “the world has grown old.”

A common feature of the new religious formations during the Hellenistic period was that they frequently contained teachings about how mankind could attain salvation from death.

These teachings were often secret. By accepting the teachings and performing certain rituals, a believer could hope for the immortality of the soul and eternal life. A certain insight into the true nature of the universe could be just as important for the salvation of the soul as religious rituals.

So much for the new religions, Sophie. But philosophy was also moving increasingly in the direction of “salvation” and serenity. Philosophic insight, it was now thought, did not only have its own reward; it should also free mankind from pessimism and the fear of death. Thus the boundaries between religion and philosophy were

gradually eliminated.

In general, the philosophy of Hellenism was not startlingly original. No new Plato or Aristotle appeared on the scene. On the contrary, the three great Athenian philosophers were a source of inspiration to a number of philosophic trends which I shall briefly describe in a moment.

Hellenistic science, too, was influenced by a blend of knowledge from the various cultures. The town of Alexandria played a key role here as a meeting place between East and West. While Athens remained the center of philosophy with still functioning schools of philosophy after Plato and Aristotle, Alexandria became the center for science. With its extensive library, it became the center for mathematics, astronomy, biology, and medicine.

Hellenistic culture could well be compared to the world of today. The twentieth century has also been influenced by an increasingly open civilization. In our own time, too, this opening out has resulted in tremendous upheavals for religion and philosophy. And just as in Rome around the beginning of the Christian era one could come across Greek, Egyptian, and Oriental religions, today, as we approach the end of the twentieth century, we can find in all European cities of any size religions from all parts of the world.

We also see nowadays how a conglomeration of old and new religions, philosophies, and sciences can form the basis of new offers on the "view-of-life" market. Much of this "new knowledge" is actually the flotsam of old thought, some of whose roots go back to Hellenism.

As I have said, Hellenistic philosophy continued to work with the problems raised by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Common to them all was their desire to discover how mankind should best live and die. They were concerned with ethics. In the new civilization, this became the central philosophical project. The main emphasis was on finding out what true happiness was and how it could be achieved. We are going to look at four of these philosophical trends.

The Cynics

The story goes that one day Socrates stood gazing at a stall that sold all kinds of wares.

Finally he said, “What a lot of things I don’t need!”

This statement could be the motto for the Cynic school of philosophy, founded by Antisthenes in Athens around 400 B.C. Antisthenes had been a pupil of Socrates, and had become particularly interested in his frugality.

The Cynics emphasized that true happiness is not found in external advantages such as material luxury, political power, or good health. True happiness lies in not being dependent on such random and fleeting things. And because happiness does not consist in benefits of this kind, it is within everyone’s reach. Moreover, having once been attained, it can never be lost.

The best known of the Cynics was Diogenes, a pupil of Antisthenes, who reputedly lived in a barrel and owned nothing but a cloak, a stick, and a bread bag. (So it wasn’t easy to steal his happiness from him!) One day while he was sitting beside his barrel enjoying the sun, he was visited by Alexander the Great. The emperor stood before him and asked if there was anything he could do for him. Was there anything he desired? “Yes,” Diogenes replied. “Stand to one side. You’re blocking the sun.” Thus Diogenes showed that he was no less happy and rich than the great man before him. He had everything he desired.

The Cynics believed that people did not need to be concerned about their own health.

Even suffering and death should not disturb them. Nor should they let themselves be tormented by concern for other people’s woes. Nowadays the terms “cynical” and “cynicism” have come to mean a sneering disbelief in human sincerity, and they imply insensitivity to other people’s suffering.

The Stoics

The Cynics were instrumental in the development of the Stoic school of philosophy, which grew up in Athens around 300 B.C. Its founder was Zeno, who came originally from Cyprus and joined the

Cynics in Athens after being shipwrecked. He used to gather his followers under a portico. The name “Stoic” comes from the Greek word for portico (stoo). Stoicism was later to have great significance for Roman culture.

Like Heraclitus, the Stoics believed that everyone was a part of the same common sense—or “logos.” They thought that each person was like a world in miniature, or “microcosmos,” which is a reflection of the “macro-cosmos.”

This led to the thought that there exists a universal right-ness, the so-called natural law. And because this natural law was based on timeless human and universal reason, it did not alter with time and place. In this, then, the Stoics sided with Socrates against the Sophists.

Natural law governed all mankind, even slaves. The Stoics considered the legal statutes of the various states merely as incomplete imitations of the “law” embedded in nature itself.

In the same way that the Stoics erased the difference between the individual and the universe, they also denied any conflict between “spirit” and “matter.” There is only one nature, they averred. This kind of idea is called monism (in contrast to Plato’s clear dualism or two-fold reality).

As true children of their time, the Stoics were distinctly “cosmopolitan,” in that they were more receptive to contemporary culture than the “barrel philosophers” (the Cynics). They drew attention to human fellowship, they were preoccupied with politics, and many of them, notably the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121-180), were active statesmen. They encouraged Greek culture and philosophy in Rome, one of the most distinguished of them being the orator, philosopher, and statesman Cicero (106-43 B.C.). It was he who formed the very concept of “humanism”—that is, a view of life that has the individual as its central focus. Some years later, the Stoic Seneca (4 B.C.-A.D. 65) said that “to mankind, mankind is holy.” This has remained a slogan for humanism ever since.

The Stoics, moreover, emphasized that all natural processes, such as sickness and death, follow the unbreakable laws of nature. Man must therefore learn to accept his destiny. Nothing happens

accidentally. Everything happens through necessity, so it is of little use to complain when fate comes knocking at the door. One must also accept the happy events of life unperturbed, they thought. In this we see their kinship with the Cynics, who claimed that all external events were unimportant. Even today we use the term “stoic calm” about someone who does not let his feelings take over.

The Epicureans

As we have seen, Socrates was concerned with finding out how man could live a good life. Both the Cynics and the Stoics interpreted his philosophy as meaning that man had to free himself from material luxuries. But Socrates also had a pupil named Aristippus. He believed that the aim of life was to attain the highest possible sensory enjoyment. “The highest good is pleasure,” he said, “the greatest evil is pain.” So he wished to develop a way of life whose aim was to avoid pain in all forms. (The Cynics and the Stoics believed in enduring pain of all kinds, which is not the same as setting out to avoid pain.)

Around the year 300 B.C., Epicurus (341-270) founded a school of philosophy in Athens.

His followers were called Epicureans. He developed the pleasure ethic of Aristippus and combined it with the atom theory of Democritus.

The story goes that the Epicureans lived in a garden. They were therefore known as the “garden philosophers.” Above the entrance to this garden there is said to have hung a notice saying, “Stranger, here you will live well. Here pleasure is the highest good.”

Epicurus emphasized that the pleasurable results of an action must always be weighed against its possible side effects. If you have ever binged on chocolate you know what I mean. If you haven’t, try this exercise: Take all your saved-up pocket money and buy two hundred crowns’ worth of chocolate. (We’ll assume you like chocolate.) It is essential to this exercise that you eat it all at one time. About half an hour later, when all that delicious chocolate is eaten, you will understand what Epicurus meant by side effects.

Epicurus also believed that a pleasurable result in the short term must be weighed against the possibility of a greater, more lasting, or

more intense pleasure in the long term. (Maybe you abstain from eating chocolate for a whole year because you prefer to save up all your pocket money and buy a new bike or go on an expensive vacation abroad.) Unlike animals, we are able to plan our lives. We have the ability to make a “pleasure calculation.” Chocolate is good, but a new bike or a trip to England is better.

Epicurus emphasized, though, that “pleasure” does not necessarily mean sensual pleasure—like eating chocolate, for instance. Values such as friendship and the appreciation of art also count. Moreover, the enjoyment of life required the old Greek ideals of self-control, temperance, and serenity. Desire must be curbed, and serenity will help us to endure pain.

Fear of the gods brought many people to the garden of Epicurus. In this connection, the atom theory of Democritus was a useful cure for religious superstitions. In order to live a good life it is not unimportant to overcome the fear of death. To this end Epicurus made use of Democritus’s theory of the “soul atoms.” You may perhaps remember that Democritus believed there was no life after death because when we die, the “soul atoms” disperse in all directions.

“Death does not concern us,” Epicurus said quite simply, “because as long as we exist, death is not here. And when it does come, we no longer exist.” (When you think about it, no one has ever been bothered by being dead.)

Epicurus summed up his liberating philosophy with what he called the four medicinal herbs:

The gods are not to be feared. Death is nothing to worry about. Good is easy to attain.

The fearful is easy to endure.

From a Greek point of view, there was nothing new in comparing philosophical projects with those of medical science. The intention was simply that man should equip himself with a “philosophic medicine chest” containing the four ingredients I mentioned.

In contrast to the Stoics, the Epicureans showed little or no interest in politics and the community. “Live in seclusion!” was the advice of Epicurus. We could perhaps compare his “garden” with

our present-day communes. There are many people in our own time who have sought a “safe harbor”—away from society.

After Epicurus, many Epicureans developed an overemphasis on self-indulgence. Their motto was “Live for the moment!” The word “epicurean” is used in a negative sense nowadays to describe someone who lives only for pleasure.

Neoplatonism

As I showed you, Cynicism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism all had their roots in the teaching of Socrates. They also made use of certain of the pre-Socratics like Heraclitus and Democritus.

But the most remarkable philosophic trend in the late Hellenistic period was first and foremost inspired by Plato’s philosophy. We therefore call it Neoplatonism.

The most important figure in Neoplatonism was Plotinus (c. 205-270), who studied philosophy in Alexandria but later settled in Rome. It is interesting to note that he came from Alexandria, the city that had been the central meeting point for Greek philosophy and Oriental mysticism for several centuries. Plotinus brought with him to Rome a doctrine of salvation that was to compete seriously with Christianity when its time came. However, Neoplatonism also became a strong influence in mainstream Christian theology as well.

Remember Plato’s doctrine of ideas, Sophie, and the way he distinguished between the world of ideas and the sensory world. This meant establishing a clear division between the soul and the body. Man thus became a dual creature: our body consisted of earth and dust like everything else in the sensory world, but we also had an immortal soul. This was widely believed by many Greeks long before Plato. Plotinus was also familiar with similar ideas from Asia.

Plotinus believed that the world is a span between two poles. At one end is the divine light which he calls the One. Sometimes he calls it God. At the other end is absolute darkness, which receives none of the light from the One. But Plotinus’s point is that this darkness actually has no existence. It is simply the absence of light—in other words, it is not. All that exists is God, or the One, but in the same way that a beam of light grows progressively dimmer and is gradually extinguished, there is somewhere a point that the

divine glow cannot reach.

According to Plotinus, the soul is illuminated by the light from the One, while matter is the darkness that has no real existence. But the forms in nature have a faint glow of the One.

Imagine a great burning bonfire in the night from which sparks fly in all directions. A wide radius of light from the bonfire turns night into day in the immediate area; but the glow from the fire is visible even from a distance of several miles. If we went even further away, we would be able to see a tiny speck of light like a far-off lantern in the dark, and if we went on moving away, at some point the light would not reach us. Somewhere the rays of light disappear into the night, and when it is completely dark we see nothing. There are neither shapes nor shadows.

Imagine now that reality is a bonfire like this. That which is burning is God—and the darkness beyond is the cold matter that man and animals are made of. Closest to God are the eternal ideas which are the primal forms of all creatures. The human soul, above all, is a “spark from the fire.” Yet everywhere in nature some of the divine light is shining. We can see it in all living creatures; even a rose or a bluebell has its divine glow. Furthest away from the living God are earth and water and stone.

I am saying that there is something of the divine mystery in everything that exists. We can see it sparkle in a sunflower or a poppy. We sense more of this unfathomable mystery in a butterfly that flutters from a twig—or in a goldfish swimming in a bowl. But we are closest to God in our own soul. Only there can we become one with the great mystery of life. In truth, at very rare moments we can experience that we ourselves are that divine mystery.

Plotinus’s metaphor is rather like Plato’s myth of the cave: the closer we get to the mouth of the cave, the closer we get to that which all existence springs from. But in contrast to Plato’s clear two-fold reality, Plotinus’s doctrine is characterized by an experience of wholeness.

Everything is one—for everything is God. Even the shadows deep down in Plato’s cave have a faint glow of the One.

On rare occasions in his life, Plotinus experienced a fusion of his soul with God. We usually call this a mystical experience.

Plotinus is not alone in having had such experiences. People have told of them at all times and in all cultures. The details might be different, but the essential features are the same. Let us take a look at some of these features.

Mysticism

A mystical experience is an experience of merging with God or the “cosmic spirit.” Many religions emphasize the gulf between God and Creation, but the mystic experiences no such gulf. He or she has experienced being “one with God” or “merging” with Him.

The idea is that what we usually call “I” is not the true “I.” In short glimpses we can experience an identification with a greater “I.” Some mystics call it God, others call it the cosmic spirit, Nature, or the Universe. When the fusion happens, the mystic feels that he is “losing himself”; he disappears into God or is lost in God in the same way that a drop of water loses itself when it merges with the sea. An Indian mystic once expressed it in this way: “When I was, God was not. When God is, I am no more.” The Christian mystic Angelus Silesius (1624-1677) put it another way: Every drop becomes the sea when it flows oceanward, just as at last the soul ascends and thus becomes the Lord.

Now you might feel that it cannot be particularly pleasant to “lose oneself.” I know what you mean. But the point is that what you lose is so very much less than what you gain. You lose yourself only in the form you have at the moment, but at the same time you realize that you are something much bigger. You are the universe. In fact, you are the cosmic spirit itself, Sophie. It is you who are God. If you have to lose yourself as Sophie Amundsen, you can take comfort in the knowledge that this “everyday I” is something you will lose one day anyway.

Your real “I”— which you can only experience if you are able to lose yourself—is, according to the mystics, like a mysterious fire that goes on burning to all eternity.

But a mystical experience like this does not always come of itself. The mystic may have to seek the path of “purification and enlightenment” to his meeting with God. This path consists of the simple life and various meditation techniques. Then all at once the

mystic achieves his goal, and can exclaim, “I am God” or “I am You.”

Mystical trends are found in all the great world religions. And the descriptions of mystical experiences given by the mystics show a remarkable similarity across all cultural boundaries. It is in the mystic’s attempt to provide a religious or philosophic interpretation of the mystical experience that his cultural background reveals itself.

In Western mysticism—that is, within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—the mystic emphasizes that his meeting is with a personal God. Although God is present both in nature and in the human soul, he is also far above and beyond the world. In Eastern mysticism—that is, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Chinese religion—it is more usual to emphasize that the mystic experiences a total fusion with God or the “cosmic spirit.”

“I am the cosmic spirit,” the mystic can exclaim, or “I am God.” For God is not only present in the world; he has nowhere else to be.

In India, especially, there have been strong mystical movements since long before the time of Plato. Swami Vivekenanda, an Indian who was instrumental in bringing Hinduism to the west, once said, “Just as certain world religions say that people who do not believe in a personal God outside themselves are atheists, we say that a person who does not believe in himself is an atheist. Not believing in the splendor of one’s own soul is what we call atheism.”

A mystical experience can also have ethical significance. A former president of India, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, said once, “Love thy neighbor as thyself because you are your neighbor. It is an illusion that makes you think that your neighbor is someone other than yourself.”

People of our own time who do not adhere to a particular religion also tell of mystical experiences. They have suddenly experienced something they have called “cosmic consciousness” or an “oceanic feeling.” They have felt themselves wrenched out of Time and have experienced the world “from the perspective of eternity.”

Sophie sat up in bed. She had to feel whether she still had a body. As she read more and more about Plato and the mystics, she

had begun to feel as though she were floating around in the room, out of the window and far off above the town. From there she had looked down on all the people in the square, and had floated on and on over the globe that was her home, over the North Sea and Europe, down over the Sahara and across the African savanna.

The whole world had become almost like a living person, and it felt as if that person were Sophie herself. The world is me, she thought. The great big universe that she had often felt to be unfathomable and terrifying—was her own “I.” Now, too, the universe was enormous and majestic, but now it was herself who was so big.

The extraordinary feeling was fleeting, but Sophie was sure she would never forget it. It felt as if something inside her had burst through her forehead and become merged with everything else, the way a drop of color can tint a whole jug of water.

When it was all over, it was like waking up with a headache after a wonderful dream. Sophie registered with a touch of disillusionment that she had a body which was trying to sit up in bed. Lying on her stomach reading the pages from Alberto Knox had given her a backache. But she had experienced something unforgettable.

Eventually she pulled herself together and stood up. The first thing she did was to punch holes in the pages and file them in her ring binder together with the other lessons. Then she went into the garden.

The birds were singing as if the world had just been born. The pale green of the birches behind the old rabbit hutches was so intense that it seemed as though the Creator had not yet finished blending the color.

Could she really believe that everything was one divine “I”? Could she believe that she carried within her a soul that was a “spark from the fire”? If it was true, then she was truly a divine creature.

The Postcards

...I'm imposing a severe censorship on myself...

Several days went by without any word from the philosophy teacher. Tomorrow was Thursday, May 17— Norway's national day. School would be closed on the 18th as well. As they walked home after school Joanna suddenly exclaimed, "Let's go camping!"

Sophie's immediate reaction was that she couldn't be away from the house for long. But then she said, "Sure, why not?"

A couple of hours later Joanna arrived at Sophie's door with a large backpack. Sophie had packed hers as well, and she also had the tent. They both had bedrolls and sweaters, groundsheets and flashlights, large-size thermos bottles and plenty of their favorite food.

When Sophie's mother got home around five o'clock, she gave them a sermon about what they must and must not do. She also insisted on knowing where they were going to set up camp.

They told her they intended to make for Grouse Top. They might be lucky enough to hear the mating call of the grouse next morning.

Sophie had an ulterior motive for choosing that particular spot. She thought that Grouse Top must be pretty close to the major's cabin. Something was urging her to return to it, but she didn't dare go alone.

The two girls walked down the path that led from the little cul-

de-sac just beyond Sophie's garden gate. They chatted about this and that, and Sophie enjoyed taking a little time off from everything having to do with philosophy.

By eight o'clock they had pitched their tent in a clearing by Grouse Top. They had prepared themselves for the night and their bedrolls were unfolded. When they had eaten their sandwiches, Sophie asked, "Have you ever heard of the major's cabin?"

"The major's cabin?"

"There's a hut in the woods somewhere near here ... by a little lake. A strange man lived there once, a major, that's why it's called the major's cabin."

"Does anyone live there now?" "Do you want to go and see?" "Where is it?"

Sophie pointed in among the trees.

Joanna was not particularly eager, but in the end they set out. The sun was low in the sky.

They walked in between the tall pine trees at first, but soon they were pushing their way through bush and thicket. Eventually they made their way down to a path. Could it be the path Sophie had followed that Sunday morning?

It must have been—almost at once she could point to something shining between the trees to the right of the path.

"It's in there," she said.

They were soon standing at the edge of the small lake. Sophie gazed at the cabin across the water. All the windows were now shuttered up. The red building was the most deserted place she had seen for ages.

Joanna turned toward her. "Do we have to walk on the water?" "Of course not. We'll row."

Sophie pointed down into the reeds. There lay the rowboat, just as before. "Have you been here before?"

Sophie shook her head. Trying to explain her previous visit would be far too complicated. And then she would have to tell her friend about Alberto Knox and the philosophy course as well.

They laughed and joked as they rowed across the water. When they reached the opposite bank, Sophie made sure they drew the boat well up on land.

They went to the front door. As there was obviously nobody in the cabin, Joanna tried the door handle.

“Locked... you didn’t expect it to be open, did you?” “Maybe we can find a key,” said Sophie.

She began to search in the crevices of the stonework foundation.

“Oh, let’s go back to the tent instead,” said Joanna after a few minutes. But just then Sophie exclaimed, “Here it is! I found it!”

She held up the key triumphantly. She put it in the lock and the door swung open.

The two friends sneaked inside as if they were up to something criminal. It was cold and dark in the cabin.

“We can’t see a thing!” said Joanna.

But Sophie had thought of that. She took a box of matches out of her pocket and struck one. They only had time to see that the cabin was deserted before the match went out. Sophie struck another, and this time she noticed a stump of candle in a wrought-iron candlestick on top of the stove. She lit it with the third match and the little room became light enough for them to look around.

“Isn’t it odd that such a small candle can light up so much darkness?” said Sophie. Her friend nodded.

“But somewhere the light disappears into the dark,” Sophie went on. “Actually, darkness has no existence of its own. It’s only a lack of light.”

Joanna shivered. “That’s creepy! Come on, let’s go...”

“Not before we’ve looked in the mirror.”

Sophie pointed to the brass mirror hanging above the chest of drawers, just as before. “That’s really pretty!” said Joanna.

“But it’s a magic mirror.”

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?”

“I’m not kidding, Joanna. I am sure you can look in it and see something on the other side.”

“Are you sure you’ve never been here before? And why is it so amusing to scare me all the time?” Sophie could not answer that one.

“Sorry.”

Now it was Joanna who suddenly discovered something lying on the floor in the corner. It was a small box. Joanna picked it up.

“Postcards,” she said. Sophie gasped.

“Don’t touch them! Do you hear—don’t you dare touch them!”

Joanna jumped. She threw the box down as if she had burnt herself. The postcards were strewn all over the floor. The next second she began to laugh.

“They’re only postcards!”

Joanna sat down on the floor and started to pick them up. After a while Sophie sat down beside her.

“Lebanon ... Lebanon ... Lebanon ... They are all postmarked in Lebanon,” Joanna discovered. “I know,” said Sophie.

Joanna sat bolt upright and looked Sophie in the eye. “So you have been here before!”

“Yes, I guess I have.”

It suddenly struck her that it would have been a whole lot easier if she had just admitted she had been here before. It couldn’t do any harm if she let her friend in on the mysterious things she had experienced during the last few days.

“I didn’t want to tell you before we were here.” Joanna began to read the cards.

“They are all addressed to someone called Hilde Moller Knag.” Sophie had not touched the cards yet.

“What address?”

Joanna read: “Hilde Moller Knag, c/o Alberto Knox, Lillesand, Norway.”

Sophie breathed a sigh of relief. She was afraid they would say c/o Sophie Amundsen. She began to inspect them more closely.

“April 28 ... May 4 ... May 6 ... May 9 ... They were stamped a few days ago.”

“But there’s something else. All the postmarks are Norwegian! Look at that... UN Battalion ... the stamps are Norwegian too!”

“I think that’s the way they do it. They have to be sort of neutral, so they have their own Norwegian post office down there.”

“But how do they get the mail home?” “The air force, probably.”

Sophie put the candlestick on the floor, and the two friends began to read the cards. Joanna arranged them in chronological order and read the first card:

Dear Hilde,

I can't wait to come home to Lillesand. I expect to land at Kjevik airport early evening on Midsummer Eve. I would much rather have arrived in time for your 15th birthday but I'm under military command of course. To make up for it, I promise to devote all my loving care to the huge present you are getting for your birthday.

With love from someone who is always thinking about his daughter's future.

P.S. I'm sending a copy of this card to our mutual friend. I know you understand, Hilde. At the moment I'm being very secretive, but you will understand.

Sophie picked up the next card:

Dear Hilde,

Down here we take one day at a time. If there is one thing I'm going to remember from these months in Lebanon, it's all this waiting. But I'm doing what I can so you have as great a 15th birthday as possible. I can't say any more at the moment. I'm imposing a severe censorship on myself.

Love, Dad.

The two friends sat breathless with excitement. Neither of them spoke, they just read what was written on the cards:

My dear child, What I would like best would be to send you my secret thoughts with a white dove.

But they are all out of white doves in Lebanon. If there is anything this war-torn country needs, it is white doves. I pray the UN will truly manage to make peace in the world some day.

P.S. Maybe your birthday present can be shared with other people. Let's talk about that when I get home. But you still have no idea what I'm talking about, right? Love from someone who has plenty of time to think for the both of us.

When they had read six cards, there was only one left. It read:

Dear Hilde,

I am now so bursting with all these secrets for your birthday that I have to stop myself several times a day from calling home and blowing the whole thing. It is something that simply grows and grows. And as you know, when a thing gets bigger and bigger it's more difficult to keep it to yourself.

Love from Dad.

P.S. Some day you will meet a girl called Sophie. To give you both a chance to get to know more about each other before you meet, I have begun sending her copies of all the cards I send to you. I expect she will soon begin to catch on, Hilde. As yet she knows no more than you. She has a girlfriend called Joanna. Maybe she can be of help?

After reading the last card, Joanna and Sophie sat quite still staring wildly at each other. Joanna was holding Sophie's wrist in a tight grip.

"I'm scared," she said. "So am I."

"When was the last card stamped?" Sophie looked again at the card. "May 16," she said. "That's today."

"It can't be!" cried Joanna, almost angrily.

They examined the postmark carefully, but there was no mistaking it... 05-16-90.

"It's impossible," insisted Joanna. "And I can't imagine who could have written it. It must be someone who knows us. But how could they know we would come here on this particular day?"

Joanna was by far the more scared of the two. The business with Hilde and her father was nothing new to Sophie.

"I think it has something to do with the brass mirror." Joanna jumped again.

"You don't actually think the cards come fluttering out of the mirror the minute they are stamped in Lebanon?"

"Do you have a better explanation?" "No."

Sophie got to her feet and held the candle up in front of the two portraits on the wall. Joanna came over and peered at the pictures.

“Berkeley and Bjerkely. What does that mean?”

“I have no idea.”

The candle was almost burnt down. “Let’s go,” said Joanna. “Come on!” “We must just take the mirror with us.”

Sophie reached up and unhooked the large brass mirror from the wall above the chest of drawers.

Joanna tried to stop her but Sophie would not be deterred.

When they got outside it was as dark as a May night can get. There was enough light in the sky for the clear outlines of bushes and trees to be visible. The small lake lay like a reflection of the sky above it. The two girls rowed pensively across to the other side.

Neither of them spoke much on the way back to the tent, but each knew that the other was thinking intensely about what they had seen. Now and then a frightened bird would start up, and a couple of times they heard the hooting of an owl.

As soon as they reached the tent, they crawled into their bedrolls. Joanna refused to have the mirror inside the tent. Before they fell asleep, they agreed that it was scary enough, knowing it was just outside the tent flap. Sophie had also taken the postcards and put them in one of the pockets of her backpack.

They woke early next morning. Sophie was up first. She put her boots on and went outside the tent. There lay the large mirror in the grass, covered with dew.

Sophie wiped the dew off with her sweater and gazed down at her own reflection. It was as if she was looking down and up at herself at the same time. Luckily she found no early morning postcard from Lebanon.

Above the broad clearing behind the tent a ragged morning mist was drifting slowly into little wads of cotton. Small birds were chirping energetically but Sophie could neither see nor hear any grouse.

The girls put on extra sweaters and ate their breakfast outside the tent. Their conversation soon turned to the major’s cabin and the mysterious cards.

After breakfast they folded up the tent and set off for home.

Sophie carried the large mirror under her arm. From time to time she had to rest—Joanna refused to touch it.

As they approached the outskirts of the town they heard a few sporadic shots. Sophie recalled what Hilde's father had written about war-torn Lebanon, and she realized how lucky she was to have been born in a peaceful country. The "shots" they heard came from innocent fireworks celebrating the national holiday.

Sophie invited Joanna in for a cup of hot chocolate. Her mother was very curious to know where they had found the mirror. Sophie told her they had found it outside the major's cabin, and her mother repeated the story about nobody having lived there for many years.

When Joanna had gone, Sophie put on a red dress. The rest of the Norwegian national day passed quite normally. In the evening, the TV news had a feature on how the Norwegian UN battalion had celebrated the day in Lebanon. Sophie's eyes were glued to the screen. One of the men she was seeing could be Hilde's father.

The last thing Sophie did on May 17 was to hang the large mirror on the wall in her room. The following morning there was a new brown envelope in the den. She tore it open at once and began to read.

Two Cultures

... the only way to avoid floating in a vacuum ...

It won't be long now before we meet, my dear Sophie. I thought you would return to the major's cabin—that's why I left all the cards from Hilde's father there. That was the only way they could be delivered to her. Don't worry about how she will get them. A lot can happen before June 15.

We have seen how the Hellenistic philosophers recycled the ideas of earlier philosophers. Some even attempted to turn their predecessors into religious prophets. Plotinus came close to acclaiming Plato as the savior of humanity.

But as we know, another savior was born during the period we have just been discussing—and that happened outside the Greco-Roman area. I refer to Jesus of Nazareth. In this chapter we will see how Christianity gradually began to permeate the Greco-Roman world—more or less the same way that Hilde's world has gradually begun to permeate ours.

Jesus was a Jew, and the Jews belong to Semitic culture. The Greeks and the Romans belong to Indo-European culture. European civilization has its roots in both cultures. But before we take a closer look at the way Christianity influenced Greco-Roman culture, we must examine these roots.

THE INDO-EUROPEANS

By Indo-European we mean all the nations and cultures that use Indo-European languages. This covers all European nations except

those whose inhabitants speak one of the Finno-Ugrian languages (Lapp, Finnish, Estonian, and Hungarian) or Basque. In addition, most Indian and Iranian languages belong to the Indo-European family of languages.

About 4,000 years ago, the primitive Indo-Europeans lived in areas bordering on the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. From there, waves of these Indo-European tribes began to wander southeast into Iran and India, southwest to Greece, Italy, and Spain, westward through Central Europe to France and Britain, northwestward to Scandinavia and northward to Eastern Europe and Russia. Wherever they went, the Indo-Europeans assimilated with the local culture, although Indo-European languages and Indo-European religion came to play a dominant role.

The ancient Indian Veda scriptures and Greek philosophy, and for that matter Snorri Sturluson's mythology are all written in related languages. But it is not only the languages that are related. Related languages often lead to related ideas. This is why we usually speak of an Indo-European "culture."

The culture of the Indo-Europeans was influenced most of all by their belief in many gods. This is called polytheism. The names of these gods as well as much of the religious terminology recur throughout the whole Indo-European area. I'll give you a few examples:

The ancient Indians worshipped the celestial god Dyaus, which in Sanskrit means the sky, day, heaven/ Heaven. In Greek this god is called Zeus, in Latin, Jupiter (actually *iovis-pater*, or "Father Heaven"), and in Old Norse, Tyr. So the names Dyaus, Zeus, *iovis*, and Tyr are dialectal variants of the same word.

You probably learned that the old Vikings believed in gods which they called Aser. This is another word we find recurring all over the Indo-European area. In Sanskrit, the ancient classical language of India, the gods are called asura and in Persian Ahura. Another word for "god" is *deva* in Sanskrit, *clava* in Persian, *deus* in Latin and *tivr* in Old Norse.

In Viking times, people also believed in a special group of fertility gods (such as Niord, Freyr, and Freyja). These gods were referred to by a special collective name, *vaner*, a word that is related

to the Latin name for the goddess of fertility, Venus. Sanskrit has the related word *vani*, which means “desire.”

There is also a clear affinity to be observed in some of the Indo-European myths. In Snorri’s stories of the Old Norse gods, some of the myths are similar to the myths of India that were handed down from two to three thousand years earlier. Although Snorri’s myths reflect the Nordic environment and the Indian myths reflect the Indian, many of them retain traces of a common origin. We can see these traces most clearly in myths about immortal potions and the struggles of the gods against the monsters of chaos.

We can also see clear similarities in modes of thought across the Indo-European cultures. A typical likeness is the way the world is seen as being the subject of a drama in which the forces of Good and Evil confront each other in a relentless struggle. Indo-Europeans have therefore often tried to “predict” how the battles between Good and Evil will turn out.

One could say with some truth that it was no accident that Greek philosophy originated in the Indo-European sphere of culture. Indian, Greek, and Norse mythology all have obvious leanings toward a philosophic, or “speculative,” view of the world.

The Indo-Europeans sought “insight” into the history of the world. We can even trace a particular word for “insight” or “knowledge” from one culture to another all over the Indo-European world. In Sanskrit it is *vidya*. The word is identical to the Greek word *idea*, which was so important in Plato’s philosophy. From Latin, we have the word *video*, but on Roman ground the word simply means to see. For us, “I see” can mean “I understand,” and in the cartoons, a light bulb can flash on above Woody Woodpecker’s head when he gets a bright idea. (Not until our own day did “seeing” become synonymous with staring at the TV screen.) In English we know the words *wise* and *wisdom*—in German, *wissen* (to know). Norwegian has the word *viten*, which has the same root as the Indian word *vidya*, the Greek *idea*, and the Latin *video*.

All in all, we can establish that sight was the most important of the senses for Indo- Europeans. The literature of Indians, Greeks, Persians, and Teutons alike was characterized by great cosmic

visions. (There is that word again: “vision” comes from the Latin verb “video.”) It was also characteristic for Indo-European culture to make pictures and sculptures of the gods and of mythical events.

Lastly, the Indo-Europeans had a cyc//c view of history. This is the belief that history goes in circles, just like the seasons of the year. There is thus no beginning and no end to history, but there are different civilizations that rise and fall in an eternal interplay between birth and death.

Both of the two great Oriental religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, are Indo-European in origin. So is Greek philosophy, and we can see a number of clear parallels between Hinduism and Buddhism on the one hand and Greek philosophy on the other. Even today, Hinduism and Buddhism are strongly imbued with philosophical reflection.

Not infrequently we find in Hinduism and Buddhism an emphasis on the fact that the deity is present in all things (pantheism) and that man can become one with God through religious insight. (Remember Plotinus, Sophie?) To achieve this requires the practice of deep self- communion or meditation. Therefore in the Orient, passivity and seclusion can be religious ideals. In ancient Greece, too, there were many people who believed in an ascetic, or religiously secluded, way of life for the salvation of the soul. Many aspects of medieval monastic life can be traced back to beliefs dating from the Greco-Roman civilization.

Similarly, the transmigration of the soul, or the cycle of rebirth, is a fundamental belief in many Indo-European cultures. For more than 2,500 years, the ultimate purpose of life for every Indian has been the release from the cycle of rebirth. Plato also believed in the transmigration of the soul.

The Semites

Let us now turn to the Semites, Sophie. They belong to a completely different culture with a completely different language. The Semites originated in the Arabian Peninsula, but they also migrated to different parts of the world. The Jews lived far from their home for more than 2,000 years. Semitic history and religion reached furthest away from its roots by way of Christendom,

although Semitic culture also became widely spread via Islam.

All three Western religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—share a Semitic background. The Muslims’ holy scripture, the Koran, and the Old Testament were both written in the Semitic family of languages. One of the Old Testament words for “god” has the same semantic root as the Muslim Allah. (The word “allah” means, quite simply, “god.”)

When we get to Christianity the picture becomes more complicated. Christianity also has a Semitic background, but the New Testament was written in Greek, and when the Christian theology or creed was formulated, it was influenced by Greek and Latin, and thus also by Hellenistic philosophy.

The Indo-Europeans believed in many different gods. It was just as characteristic for the Semites that from earliest times they were united in their belief in one God. This is called monotheism. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all share the same fundamental idea that there is only one God.

The Semites also had in common a linear view of history. In other words, history was seen as an ongoing line. In the beginning God created the world and that was the beginning of history. But one day history will end and that will be Judgment Day, when God judges the living and the dead.

The role played by history is an important feature of these three Western religions. The belief is that God intervenes in the course of history—even that history exists in order that God may manifest his will in the world, just as he once led Abraham to the “Promised Land,” he leads mankind’s steps through history to the Day of Judgment. When that day comes, all evil in the world will be destroyed.

With their strong emphasis on God’s activity in the course of history, the Semites were preoccupied with the writing of history for many thousands of years. And these historical roots constitute the very core of their holy scriptures.

Even today the city of Jerusalem is a significant religious center for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. This indicates something of the common background of these three religions.

The city comprises prominent (Jewish) synagogues, (Christian)

churches, and (Islamic) mosques. It is therefore deeply tragic that Jerusalem should have become a bone of contention—with people killing each other by the thousand because they cannot agree on who is to have ascendancy over this “Eternal City.” May the UN one day succeed in making Jerusalem a holy shrine for all three religions! (We shall not go any further into this more practical part of our philosophy course for the moment. We will leave it entirely to Hilde’s father. You must have gathered by now that he is a UN observer in Lebanon. To be more precise, I can reveal that he is serving as a major. If you are beginning to see some connection, that’s quite as it should be. On the other hand, let’s not anticipate events!)

We said that the most important of the senses for Indo-Europeans was sight. How important hearing was to the Semitic cultures is just as interesting. It is no accident that the Jewish creed begins with the words: “Hear, O Israel!” In the Old Testament we read how the people “heard” the word of the Lord, and the Jewish prophets usually began their sermons with the words: “Thus spake Jehovah (God).”

“Hearing” the word of God is also emphasized in Christianity. The religious ceremonies of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are all characterized by reading aloud or “reciting.”

I also mentioned that the Indo-Europeans always made pictorial representations or sculptures of their gods. It was just as characteristic for the Semites that they never did. They were not supposed to create pictures or sculptures of God or the “deity.” The Old Testament commands that the people shall not make any image of God. This is still law today both for Judaism and Islam. Within Islam there is moreover a general aversion to both photography and art, because people should not compete with God in “creating” anything.

But the Christian churches are full of pictures of Jesus and God, you are probably thinking. True enough, Sophie, but this is just one example of how Christendom was influenced by the Greco-Roman world. (In the Greek Orthodox Church—that is, in Greece and in Russia—“graven images,” or sculptures and

crucifixes, from Bible stories are still forbidden.)

In contrast to the great religions of the Orient, the three Western religions emphasize that there is a distance between God and his creation. The purpose is not to be released from the cycle of rebirth, but to be redeemed from sin and blame. Moreover, religious life is characterized more by prayer, sermons, and the study of the scriptures than by self-communion and meditation.

Israel

I have no intention of competing with your religion teacher, Sophie, but let us just make a quick summary of Christianity's Jewish background.

It all began when God created the world. You can read how that happened on the very first page of the Bible. Then mankind began to rebel against God. Their punishment was not only that Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden—Death also came into the world.

Man's disobedience to God is a theme that runs right through the Bible. If we go further on in the Book of Genesis we read about the Flood and Noah's Ark. Then we read that God made a covenant with Abraham and his seed. This covenant—or pact—was that Abraham and all his seed would keep the Lord's commandments. In exchange God promised to protect all the children of Abraham. This covenant was renewed when Moses was given the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai around the year 1200 B.C. At that time the Israelites had long been held as slaves in Egypt, but with God's help they were led back to the land of Israel.

About 1,000 years before Christ—and therefore long before there was anything called Greek philosophy—we hear of three great kings of Israel. The first was Saul, then came David, and after him came Solomon. Now all the Israelites were united in one kingdom, and under King David, especially, they experienced a period of political, military, and cultural glory. When kings were chosen, they were anointed by the people. They thus received the title *Messiah*, which means

“the anointed one.” In a religious sense kings were looked upon as a go-between between God and his people. The king could therefore also be called the “Son of God” and the country could be called the “Kingdom of God.”

But before long Israel began to lose its power and the kingdom was divided into a Northern kingdom (Israel) and a Southern kingdom (Judea). In 722 B.C. the Northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians and it lost all political and religious significance. The Southern kingdom fared no better, being conquered by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Its temple was destroyed and most of its people were carried off to slavery in Babylon. This “Babylonian captivity” lasted until 539 B.C. when the people were permitted to return to Jerusalem, and the great temple was restored. But for the rest of the period before the birth of Christ the Jews continued to live under foreign domination.

The question Jews constantly asked themselves was why the Kingdom of David was destroyed and why catastrophe after catastrophe rained down on them, for God had promised to hold Israel in his hand. But the people had also promised to keep God’s commandments. It gradually became widely accepted that God was punishing Israel for her disobedience.

From around 750 B.C. various prophets began to come forward preaching God’s wrath over Israel for not keeping his commandments. One day God would hold a Day of Judgment over Israel, they said. We call prophecies like these Doomsday prophecies.

In the course of time there came other prophets who preached that God would redeem a chosen few of his people and send them a “Prince of Peace” or a king of the House of David. He would restore the old Kingdom of David and the people would have a future of prosperity.

“The people that walked in darkness will see a great light,” said the prophet Isaiah, and “they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” We call prophecies like these prophecies of redemption.

To sum up: The children of Israel lived happily under King David. But later on when their situation deteriorated, their prophets

began to proclaim that there would one day come a new king of the House of David. This “Messiah,” or “Son of God,” would “redeem” the people, restore Israel to greatness, and found a “Kingdom of God.”

Jesus

I assume you are still with me, Sophie? The key words are “Messiah,” “Son of God,” and “Kingdom of God.” At first it was all taken politically. In the time of Jesus, there were a lot of people who imagined that there would come a new “Messiah” in the sense of a political, military, and religious leader of the caliber of King David. This “savior” was thus looked upon as a national deliverer who would put an end to the suffering of the Jews under Roman domination.

Well and good. But there were also many people who were more farsighted. For the past two hundred years there had been prophets who believed that the promised “Messiah” would be the savior of the whole world. He would not simply free the Israelites from a foreign yoke, he would save all mankind from sin and blame—and not least, from death. The longing for “salvation” in the sense of redemption was widespread all over the Hellenistic world.

So along comes Jesus of Nazareth. He was not the only man ever to have come forward as the promised “Messiah.” Jesus also uses the words “Son of God,” the “Kingdom of God,” and “redemption.” In doing this he maintains the link with the old prophets. He rides into Jerusalem and allows himself to be acclaimed by the crowds as the savior of the people, thus playing directly on the way the old kings were installed in a characteristic “throne accession ritual.” He also allows himself to be anointed by the people. “The time is fulfilled,” he says, and “the Kingdom of God is at hand.”

But here is a very important point: Jesus distinguished himself from the other “messiahs” by stating clearly that he was not a military or political rebel. His mission was much greater. He preached salvation and God’s forgiveness for everyone. To the people he met on his way he said “Your sins are forgiven you for his name’s sake.”

Handing out the “remission of sins” in this way was totally unheard of. And what was even worse, he addressed God as “Father” (Abba). This was absolutely unprecedented in the Jewish community at that time. It was therefore not long before there arose a wave of protest against him among the scribes.

So here was the situation: a great many people at the time of Jesus were waiting for a Messiah who would reestablish the Kingdom of God with a great flourish of trumpets (in other words, with fire and sword). The expression “Kingdom of God” was indeed a recurring theme in the preachings of Jesus—but in a much broader sense. Jesus said that the “Kingdom of God” is loving thy neighbor, compassion for the weak and the poor, and forgiveness of those who have erred.

This was a dramatic shift in the meaning of an age-old expression with warlike overtones.

People were expecting a military leader who would soon proclaim the establishment of the Kingdom of God, and along comes Jesus in kirtle and sandals telling them that the Kingdom of God—or the “new covenant”—is that you must “love thy neighbor as thyself.” But that was not all, Sophie, he also said that we must love our enemies. When they strike us, we must not retaliate; we must even turn the other cheek. And we must forgive—not seven times but seventy times seven.

Jesus himself demonstrated that he was not above talking to harlots, corrupt usurers, and the politically subversive. But he went even further: he said that a good-for-nothing who has squandered all his father’s inheritance—or a humble publican who has pocketed official funds—is righteous before God when he repents and prays for forgiveness, so great is God’s mercy.

But hang on—he went a step further: Jesus said that such sinners were more righteous in the eyes of God and more deserving of God’s forgiveness than the spotless Pharisees who went around flaunting their virtue.

Jesus pointed out that nobody can earn God’s mercy. We cannot redeem ourselves (as many of the Greeks believed). The severe ethical demands made by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount were not only to teach what the will of God meant, but also to show

that no man is righteous in the eyes of God. God's mercy is boundless, but we have to turn to God and pray for his forgiveness.

I shall leave a more thorough study of Jesus and his teachings to your religion teacher. He will have quite a task. I hope he will succeed in showing what an exceptional man Jesus was. In an ingenious way he used the language of his time to give the old war cries a totally new and broader content. It's not surprising that he ended on the Cross. His radical tidings of redemption were at odds with so many interests and power factors that he had to be removed.

When we talked about Socrates, we saw how dangerous it could be to appeal to people's reason. With Jesus we see how dangerous it can be to demand unconditional brotherly love and unconditional forgiveness. Even in the world of today we can see how mighty powers can come apart at the seams when confronted with simple demands for peace, love, food for the poor, and amnesty for the enemies of the state.

You may recall how incensed Plato was that the most righteous man in Athens had to forfeit his life. According to Christian teachings, Jesus was the only righteous person who ever lived. Nevertheless he was condemned to death. Christians say he died for the sake of humanity. This is what Christians usually call the "Passion" of Christ Jesus was the "suffering servant" who bore the sins of humanity in order that we could be "atoned" and saved from God's wrath.

Paul

A few days after Jesus had been crucified and buried, rumors spread that he had risen from the grave. He thereby proved that he was no ordinary man. He truly was the "Son of God."

We could say that the Christian Church was founded on Easter Morning with the rumors of the resurrection of Jesus. This is already established by Paul: "And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain and your faith is also vain."

Now all mankind could hope for the resurrection of the body, for it was to save us that Jesus was crucified. But, dear Sophie, remember that from a Jewish point of view there was no question of the "immortality of the soul" or any form of "transmigration"; that

was a Greek— and therefore an Indo-European—thought. According to Christianity there is nothing in man— no “soul,” for example— that is in itself immortal. Although the Christian Church believes in the “resurrection of the body and eternal life,” it is by God’s miracle that we are saved from death and “damnation.” It is neither through our own merit nor through any natural—or innate—ability.

So the early Christians began to preach the “glad tidings” of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Through his mediation, the “Kingdom of God” was about to become a reality. Now the entire world could be won for Christ. (The word “christ” is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word “messiah,” the anointed one.)

A few years after the death of Jesus, the Pharisee Paul converted to Christianity.

Through his many missionary journeys across the whole of the Greco-Roman world he made Christianity a worldwide religion. We hear of this in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul’s preaching and guidance for the Christians is known to us from the many epistles written by him to the early Christian congregations.

He then turns up in Athens. He wanders straight into the city square of the philosophic capital. And it is said that “his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.” He visited the Jewish synagogue in Athens and conversed with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. They took him up to the Areopagos hill and asked him: “May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean.”

Can you imagine it, Sophie? A Jew suddenly appears in the Athenian marketplace and starts talking about a savior who was hung on a cross and later rose from the grave. Even from this visit of Paul in Athens we sense a coming collision between Greek philosophy and the doctrine of Christian redemption. But Paul clearly succeeds in getting the Athenians to listen to him. From the Areopagos—and beneath the proud temples of the Acropolis— he makes the following speech:

“Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too

superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things. And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him and find him, though he be not far from every one of us. For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent:

Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead."

Paul in Athens, Sophie! Christianity has begun to penetrate the Greco-Roman world as something else, something completely different from Epicurean, Stoic, or Neoplatonic philosophy. But Paul nevertheless finds some common ground in this culture. He emphasizes that the search for God is natural to all men. This was not new to the Greeks. But what was new in Paul's preaching is that God has also revealed himself to mankind and has in truth reached out to them. So he is no longer a "philosophic God" that people can approach with their understanding. Neither is he "an image of gold or silver or stone"—there were plenty of those both on the Acropolis and down in the marketplace! He is a God that "dwelleth not in temples made with hands." He is a personal God who intervenes in the course of history and dies on the Cross for the sake of mankind.

When Paul had made his speech on the Areopagos, we read in the Acts of the Apostles, some mocked him for what he said about

the resurrection from the dead. But others said: “We will hear thee again of this matter.” There were also some who followed Paul and began to believe in Christianity. One of them, it is worth noting, was a woman named Damaris. Women were amongst the most fervent converts to Christianity.

So Paul continued his missionary activities. A few decades after the death of Jesus, Christian congregations were already established in all the important Greek and Roman cities—in Athens, in Rome, in Alexandria, in Ephesos, and in Corinth. In the space of three to four hundred years, the entire Hellenistic world had become Christian.

The Creed

It was not only as a missionary that Paul came to have a fundamental significance for Christianity. He also had great influence within the Christian congregations. There was a widespread need for spiritual guidance.

One important question in the early years after Jesus was whether non-Jews could become Christians without first becoming Jews. Should a Greek, for instance, observe the dietary laws? Paul believed it to be unnecessary. Christianity was more than a Jewish sect. It addressed itself to everybody in a universal message of salvation. The “Old Covenant” between God and Israel had been replaced by the “New Covenant” which Jesus had established between God and mankind.

However, Christianity was not the only religion at that time. We have seen how Hellenism was influenced by a fusion of religions. It was thus vitally necessary for the church to step forward with a concise summary of the Christian doctrine, both in order to distance itself from other religions and to prevent schisms within the Christian Church. Therefore the first Creed was established, summing up the central Christian “dogmas” or tenets.

One such central tenet was that Jesus was both God and man. He was not the “Son of God” on the strength of his actions alone. He was God himself. But he was also a “true

man” who had shared the misfortunes of mankind and actually suffered on the Cross.

This may sound like a contradiction. But the message of the church was precisely that God became man. Jesus was not a “demigod” (which was half man, half god). Belief in such “demigods” was quite widespread in Greek and Hellenistic religions. The church taught that Jesus was “perfect God, perfect man.”

Postscript

Let me try to say a few words about how all this hangs together, my dear Sophie. As Christianity makes its entry into the Greco-Roman world we are witnessing a dramatic meeting of two cultures. We are also seeing one of history’s great cultural revolutions.

We are about to step out of antiquity. Almost one thousand years have passed since the days of the early Greek philosophers. Ahead of us we have the Christian Middle Ages, which also lasted for about a thousand years.

The German poet Goethe once said that “he who cannot draw on three thousand years is living from hand to mouth.” I don’t want you to end up in such a sad state. I will do what I can to acquaint you with your historical roots. It is the only way to become a human being. It is the only way to become more than a naked ape. It is the only way to avoid floating in a vacuum.

“It is the only way to become a human being. It is the only way to become more than a naked ape ...”

Sophie sat for a while staring into the garden through the little holes in the hedge. She was beginning to understand why it was so important to know about her historical roots. It had certainly been important to the Children of Israel.

She herself was just an ordinary person. But if she knew her historical roots, she would be a little less ordinary.

She would not be living on this planet for more than a few years. But if the history of mankind was her own history, in a way she was thousands of years old.

The Middle Ages

... going only part of the way is not the same
as going the wrong way...

A week passed without Sophie hearing from Alberto Knox. There were no more postcards from Lebanon either, although she and Joanna still talked about the cards they found in the major's cabin. Joanna had had the fright of her life, but as nothing further seemed to happen, the immediate terror faded and was submerged in homework and badminton.

Sophie read Alberto's letters over and over, looking for some clue that would throw light on the Hilde mystery. Doing so also gave her plenty of opportunity to digest the classical philosophy. She no longer had difficulty in distinguishing Democritus and Socrates, or Plato and Aristotle, from each other.

On Friday, May 25, she was in the kitchen fixing dinner before her mother got home. It was their regular Friday agreement. Today she was making fish soup with fish balls and carrots. Plain and simple.

Outside it was becoming windy. As Sophie stood stirring the casserole she turned toward the window. The birch trees were waving like cornstalks.

Suddenly something smacked against the window-pane. Sophie turned around again and discovered a card sticking to the window.

It was a postcard. She could read it through the glass: "Hilde Moller Knag, c/o Sophie Amundsen."

She thought as much! She opened the window and took the card. It could hardly have blown all the way from Lebanon!

This card was also dated June 15. Sophie removed the casserole from the stove and sat down at the kitchen table. The card read:

Dear Hilde, I don't know whether it will still be your birthday when you read this card. I hope so, in a way; or at least that not too

many days have gone by. A week or two for Sophie does not have to mean just as long for us. I shall be coming home for Midsummer Eve, so we can sit together for hours in the glider, looking out over the sea, Hilde. We have so much to talk about. Love from Dad, who sometimes gets very depressed about the thousand-year-long strife between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. I have to keep reminding myself that all three religions stem from Abraham. So I suppose they all pray to the same God. Down here, Cain and Abel have not finished killing each other.

P.S. Please say hello to Sophie. Poor child, she still doesn't know how this whole thing hangs together. But perhaps you do?

Sophie put her head down on the table, exhausted. One thing was certain—she had no idea how this thing hung together. But Hilde did, presumably.

If Hilde's father asked her to say hello to Sophie, it had to mean that Hilde knew more about Sophie than Sophie did about Hilde. It was all so complicated that Sophie went back to fixing dinner.

A postcard that smacked against the kitchen window all by itself! You could call that airmail! As soon as she had set the casserole on the stove again, the telephone rang.

Suppose it was Dad! She wished desperately that he would come home so she could tell him everything that had happened in these last weeks. But it was probably only Joanna or Mom. Sophie snatched up the phone.

"Sophie Amundsen," she said. "It's me," said a voice.

Sophie was sure of three things: it was not her father. But it was a man's voice, and a voice she knew she had heard before.

"Who is this?" "It's Alberto." "Ohhh!"

Sophie was at a loss for words. It was the voice from the Acropolis video that she had recognized. "Are you all right?"

"Sure."

"From now on there will be no more letters." "But I didn't send you a frog!"

"We must meet in person. It's beginning to be urgent, you see." "Why?"

"Hilde's father is closing in on us." "Closing in how?"

"On all sides, Sophie. We have to work together now."

“How...?”

“But you can’t help much before I have told you about the Middle Ages. We ought to cover the Renaissance and the seventeenth century as well. Berkeley is a key figure...”

“Wasn’t he the man in the picture at the major’s cabin?”

“That very same. Maybe the actual struggle will be waged over his philosophy.” “You make it sound like a war.”

“I would rather call it a battle of wills. We have to attract Hilde’s attention and get her over on our side before her father comes home to Lillesand.”

“I don’t get it at all.”

“Perhaps the philosophers can open your eyes. Meet me at St. Mary’s Church at eight o’clock tomorrow morning. But come alone, my child.”

“So early in the morning?” The telephone clicked. “Hello?”

He had hung up! Sophie rushed back to the stove just before the fish soup boiled over.

St. Mary’s Church? That was an old stone church from the Middle Ages. It was only used for concerts and very special ceremonies. And in the summer it was sometimes open to tourists. But surely it wasn’t open in the middle of the night?

When her mother got home, Sophie had put the card from Lebanon with everything else from Alberto and Hilde. After dinner she went over to Joanna’s place.

“We have to make a very special arrangement,” she said as soon as her friend opened the door. She said no more until Joanna had closed her bedroom door.

“It’s rather problematic,” Sophie went on. “Spit it out!”

“I’m going to have to tell Mom that I’m staying the night here.” “Great!”

“But it’s only something I’m saying, you see. I’ve got to go somewhere else.” “That’s bad. Is it a guy?”

“No, it’s to do with Hilde.”

Joanna whistled softly, and Sophie looked her severely in the eye.

“I’m coming over this evening,” she said, “but at seven o’clock I’ve got to sneak out again.”

You've got to cover for me until I get back."

"But where are you going? What is it you have to do?" "Sorry. My lips are sealed."

Sleepovers were never a problem. On the contrary, almost. Sometimes Sophie got the impression that her mother enjoyed having the house to herself.

"You'll be home for breakfast, I suppose?" was her mother's only remark as Sophie left the house. "If I'm not, you know where I am."

What on earth made her say that? It was the one weak spot.

Sophie's visit began like any other sleepover, with talk until late into the night. The only difference was that when they finally settled down to sleep at about two o'clock, Sophie set the alarm clock to a quarter to seven.

Five hours later, Joanna woke briefly as Sophie switched off the buzzer. "Take care," she mumbled.

Then Sophie was on her way. St. Mary's Church lay on the outskirts of the old part of town. It was several miles walk away, but even though she had only slept for a few hours she felt wide awake.

It was almost eight o'clock when she stood at the entrance to the old stone church. Sophie tried the massive door. It was unlocked!

Inside the church it was as deserted and silent as the church was old. A bluish light filtered in through the stained-glass windows revealing a myriad of tiny particles of dust hovering in the air. The dust seemed to gather in thick beams this way and that inside the church. Sophie sat on one of the benches in the center of the nave, staring toward the altar at an old crucifix painted with muted colors.

Some minutes passed. Suddenly the organ began to play. Sophie dared not look around. It sounded like an ancient hymn, probably from the Middle Ages.

There was silence again. Then she heard footsteps approaching from behind her. Should she look around? She chose instead to fix her eyes on the Cross.

The footsteps passed her on their way up the aisle and she saw a figure dressed in a brown monk's habit. Sophie could have sworn it was a monk right out of the Middle Ages.

She was nervous, but not scared out of her wits. In front of the

altar the monk turned in a half- circle and then climbed up into the pulpit. He leaned over the edge, looked down at Sophie, and addressed her in Latin:

“Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.”

“Talk sense, silly!” Sophie burst out.

Her voice resounded all around the old stone church.

Although she realized that the monk had to be Alberto Knox, she regretted her outburst in this venerable place of worship. But she had been nervous, and when you’re nervous its comforting to break all taboos.

“Shhh!” Alberto held up one hand as priests do when they want the congregation to be seated. “Middle Ages began at four,” he said.

“Middle Ages began at four?” asked Sophie, feeling stupid but no longer nervous.

“About four o’clock, yes. And then it was five and six and seven. But it was as if time stood still.

And it got to be eight and nine and ten. But it was still the Middle Ages, you see. Time to get up to a new day, you may think. Yes, I see what you mean. But it is still Sunday, one long endless row of Sundays. And it got to be eleven and twelve and thirteen. This was the period we call the High Gothic, when the great cathedrals of Europe were built. And then, some time around fourteen hours, at two in the afternoon, a cock crowed—and the Middle Ages began to ebb away.”

“So the Middle Ages lasted for ten hours then,” said Sophie. Alberto thrust his head forward out of the brown monk’s cowl and surveyed his congregation, which consisted of a fourteen-year-old girl.

“If each hour was a hundred years, yes. We can pretend that Jesus was born at midnight. Paul began his missionary journeys just before half past one in the morning and died in Rome a quarter of an hour later. Around three in the morning the Christian church was more or less banned, but by A.D. 313 it was an accepted religion in the Roman Empire. That was in the reign of the Emperor Constantine. The holy emperor himself was first baptized on his deathbed many years later. From the year 380 Christianity was the

official religion throughout the entire Roman Empire.”

“Didn’t the Roman Empire fall?”

“It was just beginning to crumble. We are standing before one of the greatest changes in the history of culture. Rome in the fourth century was being threatened both by barbarians pressing in from the north and by disintegration from within. In A.D. 330 Constantine the Great moved the capital of the Empire from Rome to Constantinople, the city he had founded at the approach to the Black Sea. Many people considered the new city the “second Rome.” In 395 the Roman Empire was divided in two—a Western Empire with Rome as its center, and an Eastern Empire with the new city of Constantinople as its capital. Rome was plundered by barbarians in 410, and in 476 the whole of the Western Empire was destroyed. The Eastern Empire continued to exist as a state right up until 1453 when the Turks conquered Constantinople.”

“And its name got changed to Istanbul?”

“That’s right! Istanbul is its latest name. Another date we should notice is 529. That was the year when the church closed Plato’s Academy in Athens. In the same year, the Benedictine order, the first of the great monastic orders, was founded. The year 529 thus became a symbol of the way the Christian Church put the lid on Greek philosophy. From then on, monasteries had the monopoly of education, reflection, and meditation. The clock was ticking toward half past five ...”

Sophie saw what Alberto meant by all these times. Midnight was 0, one o’clock was 100 years after Christ, six o’clock was 600 years after Christ, and 14 hours was 1,400 years after Christ...

Alberto continued: “The Middle Ages actually means the period between two other epochs. The expression arose during the Renaissance. The Dark Ages, as they were also called, were seen then as one interminable thousand-year-long night which had settled over Europe between antiquity and the Renaissance. The word ‘medieval’ is used negatively nowadays about anything that is over-authoritative and inflexible. But many historians now consider the Middle Ages to have been a thousand-year period of germination and growth. The school system, for instance, was developed in the Middle Ages. The first convent schools were opened quite early on

in the period, and cathedral schools followed in the twelfth century. Around the year 1200 the first universities were founded, and the subjects to be studied were grouped into various 'faculties,' just as they are today."

"A thousand years is a really long time."

"Yes, but Christianity took time to reach the masses. Moreover, in the course of the Middle Ages the various nation-states established themselves, with cities and citizens, folk music and folktales. What would fairy tales and folk songs have been without the Middle Ages? What would Europe have been, even? A Roman province, perhaps. Yet the resonance in such names as England, France, or Germany is the very same boundless deep we call the Middle Ages. There are many shining fish swimming around in those depths, although we do not always catch sight of them. Snorri lived in the Middle Ages. So did Saint Olaf and Charlemagne, to say nothing of Romeo and Juliet, Joan of Arc, Ivanhoe, the Pied Piper of Hamelin, and many mighty princes and majestic kings, chivalrous knights and fair damsels, anonymous stained-glass window makers and ingenious organ builders. And I haven't even mentioned friars, crusaders, or witches."

"You haven't mentioned the clergy, either."

"Correct. Christianity didn't come to Norway, by the way, until the eleventh century. It would be an exaggeration to say that the Nordic countries converted to Christianity at one fell swoop. Ancient heathen beliefs persisted under the surface of Christianity, and many of these pre-Christian elements became integrated with Christianity. In Scandinavian Christmas celebrations, for example, Christian and Old Norse customs are wedded even to this day. And here the old saying applies, that married folk grow to resemble each other. Yuletide cookies, Yuletide piglets, and Yuletide ale begin to resemble the Three Wise Men from the Orient and the manger in Bethlehem. But without doubt, Christianity gradually became the predominant philosophy of life. Therefore we usually speak of the Middle Ages as being a unifying force of Christian culture."

"So it wasn't all gloom, then?"

"The first centuries after the year 400 really were a cultural decline. The Roman period had been a high culture, with big cities

that had sewers, public baths, and libraries, not to mention proud architecture. In the early centuries of the Middle Ages this entire culture crumbled. So did its trade and economy. In the Middle Ages people returned to payment in kind and bartering. The economy was now characterized by feudalism, which meant that a few powerful nobles owned the land, which the serfs had to toil on in order to live. The population also declined steeply in the first centuries. Rome had over a million inhabitants in antiquity. But by 600, the population of the old Roman capital had fallen to 40,000, a mere fraction of what it had been. Thus a relatively small population was left to wander among what remained of the majestic edifices of the city's former glory. When they needed building materials, there were plenty of ruins to supply them. This is naturally a source of great sorrow to present-day archeologists, who would rather have seen medieval man leave the ancient monuments untouched."

"It's easy to know better after the fact."

"From a political point of view, the Roman period was already over by the end of the fourth century. However, the Bishop of Rome became the supreme head of the Roman Catholic Church. He was given the title 'Pope'—in Latin 'papa,' which means what it says—and gradually became looked upon as Christ's deputy on earth. Rome was thus the Christian capital throughout most of the medieval period. But as the kings and bishops of the new nation-states became more and more powerful, some of them were bold enough to stand up to the might of the church."

"You said the church closed Plato's Academy in Athens. Does that mean that all the Greek philosophers were forgotten?"

"Not entirely. Some of the writings of Aristotle and Plato were known. But the old Roman Empire was gradually divided into three different cultures. In Western Europe we had a Latinized Christian culture with Rome as its capital. In Eastern Europe we had a Greek Christian culture with Constantinople as its capital. This city began to be called by its Greek name, Byzantium. We therefore speak of the Byzantine Middle Ages as opposed to the Roman Catholic Middle Ages. However, North Africa and the Middle East had also been part of the Roman Empire. This area developed during the Middle Ages into an Arabic-speaking Muslim culture. After the

death of Muhammad in 632, both the Middle East and North Africa were won over to Islam. Shortly thereafter, Spain also became part of the world of Islamic culture. Islam adopted Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, and Bagdad as holy cities. From the point of view of cultural history, it is interesting to note that the Arabs also took over the ancient Hellenistic city of Alexandria. Thus much of the old Greek science was inherited by the Arabs. All through the Middle Ages, the Arabs were predominant in sciences such as mathematics, chemistry, astronomy, and medicine. Nowadays we still use Arabic figures. In a number of areas Arabic culture was superior to Christian culture.”

“I wanted to know what happened to Greek philosophy.”

“Can you imagine a broad river that divides for a while into three different streams before it once again becomes one great wide river?”

“Yes.”

“Then you can also see how the Greco-Roman culture was divided, but survived through the three cultures: the Roman Catholic in the west, the Byzantine in the east, and the Arabic in the south.

Although it’s greatly oversimplified, we could say that Neoplatonism was handed down in the west, Plato in the east, and Aristotle to the Arabs in the south. But there was also something of them all in all three streams. The point is that at the end of the Middle Ages, all three streams came together in Northern Italy. The Arabic influence came from the Arabs in Spain, the Greek influence from Greece and the Byzantine Empire. And now we see the beginning of the Renaissance, the ‘rebirth’ of antique culture. In one sense, antique culture had survived the Dark Ages.” “I see.”

“But let us not anticipate the course of events. We must first talk a little about medieval philosophy. I shall not speak from this pulpit any more. I’m coming down.”

Sophie’s eyes were heavy from too little sleep. When she saw the strange monk descending from the pulpit of St. Mary’s Church, she felt as if she were dreaming.

Alberto walked toward the altar rail. He looked up at the altar with its ancient crucifix, then he walked slowly toward Sophie. He sat down beside her on the bench of the pew.

It was a strange feeling, being so close to him. Under his cowl Sophie saw a pair of deep brown eyes. They belonged to a middle-aged man with dark hair and a little pointed beard. Who are you, she wondered. Why have you turned my life upside down?

“We shall become better acquainted by and by,” he said, as if he had read her thoughts.

As they sat there together, with the light that filtered into the church through the stained-glass windows becoming sharper and sharper, Alberto Knox began to talk about medieval philosophy.

“The medieval philosophers took it almost for granted that Christianity was true,” he began. “The question was whether we must simply believe the Christian revelation or whether we can approach the Christian truths with the help of reason. What was the relationship between the Greek philosophers and what the Bible said? Was there a contradiction between the Bible and reason, or were belief and knowledge compatible? Almost all medieval philosophy centered on this one question.”

Sophie nodded impatiently. She had been through this in her religion class.

“We shall see how the two most prominent medieval philosophers dealt with this question, and we might as well begin with St. Augustine, who lived from 354 to 430. In this one person’s life we can observe the actual transition from late antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. Augustine was born in the little town of Tagaste in North Africa. At the age of sixteen he went to Carthage to study. Later he traveled to Rome and Milan, and lived the last years of his life in the town of Hippo, a few miles west of Carthage. However, he was not a Christian all his life. Augustine examined several different religions and philosophies before he became a Christian.”

“Could you give some examples?”

“For a time he was a Manichaean. The Manichaeans were a religious sect that was extremely characteristic of late antiquity. Their doctrine was half religion and half philosophy, asserting that the world consisted of a dualism of good and evil, light and darkness, spirit and matter. With his spirit, mankind could rise above the world of matter and thus prepare for the salvation of his soul. But this sharp division between good and evil gave the young

Augustine no peace of mind. He was completely preoccupied with what we like to call the ‘problem of evil.’ By this we mean the question of where evil comes from. For a time he was influenced by Stoic philosophy, and according to the Stoics, there was no sharp division between good and evil. However, his principal leanings were toward the other significant philosophy of late antiquity, Neoplatonism. Here he came across the idea that all existence is divine in nature.”

“So he became a Neoplatonic bishop?”

“Yes, you could say that. He became a Christian first, but the Christianity of St. Augustine is largely influenced by Platonic ideas. And therefore, Sophie, therefore you have to understand that there is no dramatic break with Greek philosophy the minute we enter the Christian Middle Ages. Much of Greek philosophy was carried over to the new age through Fathers of the Church like St. Augustine.”

“Do you mean that St. Augustine was half Christian and half Neoplatonist?”

“He himself believed he was a hundred-percent Christian although he saw no real contradiction between Christianity and the philosophy of Plato. For him, the similarity between Plato and the Christian doctrine was so apparent that he thought Plato must have had knowledge of the Old Testament. This, of course, is highly improbable. Let us rather say that it was St. Augustine who ‘christianized’ Plato.”

“So he didn’t turn his back on everything that had to do with philosophy when he started believing in Christianity?”

“No, but he pointed out that there are limits to how far reason can get you in religious questions.

Christianity is a divine mystery that we can only perceive through faith. But if we believe in Christianity, God will ‘illuminate’ the soul so that we experience a sort of supernatural knowledge of God. St. Augustine had felt within himself that there was a limit to how far philosophy could go. Not before he became a Christian did he find peace in his own soul. ‘Our heart is not quiet until it rests in Thee,’ he writes.”

“I don’t quite understand how Plato’s ideas could go together with Christianity,” Sophie objected. “What about the eternal ideas?”

“Well, St. Augustine certainly maintains that God created the world out of the void, and that was a Biblical idea. The Greeks preferred the idea that the world had always existed. But St. Augustine believed that before God created the world, the ‘ideas’ were in the Divine mind. So he located the Platonic ideas in God and in that way preserved the Platonic view of eternal ideas.”

“That was smart.”

“But it indicates how not only St. Augustine but many of the other Church Fathers bent over backward to bring Greek and Jewish thought together. In a sense they were of two cultures. Augustine also inclined to Neoplatonism in his view of evil. He believed, like Plotinus, that evil is the ‘absence of God.’ Evil has no independent existence, it is something that is not, for God’s creation is in fact only good. Evil comes from mankind’s disobedience, Augustine believed. Or, in his own words, ‘The good will is God’s work; the evil will is the falling away from God’s work.’ “

“Did he also believe that man has a divine soul?”

“Yes and no. St. Augustine maintained that there is an insurmountable barrier between God and the world. In this he stands firmly on Biblical ground, rejecting the doctrine of Plotinus that everything is one. But he nevertheless emphasizes that man is a spiritual being. He has a material body—which belongs to the physical world which ‘moth and rust doth corrupt’—but he also has a soul which can know God.”

“What happens to the soul when we die?”

“According to St. Augustine, the entire human race was lost after the Fall of Man. But God nevertheless decided that certain people should be saved from perdition.”

“In that case, God could just as well have decided that everybody should be saved.”

“As far as that goes, St. Augustine denied that man has any right to criticize God, referring to Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: ‘O Man, who art thou that replies! against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it; why hast thou made me thus? or Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor?’ “

“So God sits up in his Heaven playing with people? And as soon as he is dissatisfied with one of his creations, he just throws it away.”

“St. Augustine’s point was that no man deserves God’s redemption. And yet God has chosen some to be saved from damnation, so for him there was nothing secret about who will be saved and who damned. It is preordained. We are entirely at his mercy.”

“So in a way, he returned to the old belief in fate.”

“Perhaps. But St. Augustine did not renounce man’s responsibility for his own life. He taught that we must live in awareness of being among the chosen. He did not deny that we have free will. But God has ‘foreseen’ how we will live.”

“Isn’t that rather unfair?” asked Sophie. “Socrates said that we all had the same chances because we all had the same common sense. But St. Augustine divides people into two groups. One group gets saved and the other gets damned.”

“You are right in that St. Augustine’s theology is considerably removed from the humanism of Athens. But St. Augustine wasn’t dividing humanity into two groups. He was merely expounding the Biblical doctrine of salvation and damnation. He explained this in a learned work called the City of God.”

“Tell me about that.”

“The expression ‘City of God,’ or ‘Kingdom of God,’ comes from the Bible and the teachings of Jesus. St. Augustine believed that all human history is a struggle between the ‘Kingdom of God’ and the ‘Kingdom of the World.’ The two ‘kingdoms’ are not political kingdoms distinct from each other. They struggle for mastery inside every single person. Nevertheless, the Kingdom of God is more or less clearly present in the Church, and the Kingdom of the World is present in the State—for example, in the Roman Empire, which was in decline at the time of St. Augustine. This conception became increasingly clear as Church and State fought for supremacy throughout the Middle Ages. There is no salvation outside the Church,’ it was now said. St. Augustine’s ‘City of God’ eventually became identical with the established Church. Not until the Reformation in the sixteenth century was there any protest

against the idea that people could only obtain salvation through the Church.”

“It was about time!”

“We can also observe that St. Augustine was the first philosopher we have come across to draw history into his philosophy. The struggle between good and evil was by no means new. What was new was that for Augustine the struggle was played out in history. There is not much of Plato in this aspect of St. Augustine’s work. He was more influenced by the linear view of history as we meet it in the Old Testament: the idea that God needs all of history in order to realize his Kingdom of God. History is necessary for the enlightenment of man and the destruction of evil. Or, as St. Augustine put it, ‘Divine foresight directs the history of mankind from Adam to the end of time as if it were the story of one man who gradually develops from childhood to old age.’ “

Sophie looked at her watch. “It’s ten o’clock,” she said. “I’ll have to go soon.”

“But first I must tell you about the other great medieval philosopher. Shall we sit outside?”

Alberto stood up. He placed the palms of his hands together and began to stride down the aisle. He looked as if he was praying or meditating deeply on some spiritual truth. Sophie followed him; she felt she had no choice.

The sun had not yet broken through the morning clouds. Alberto seated himself on a bench outside the church. Sophie wondered what people would think if anyone came by. Sitting on a church bench at ten in the morning was odd in itself, and sitting with a medieval monk wouldn’t make things look any better.

“It is eight o’clock,” he began. “About four hundred years have elapsed since St. Augustine, and now school starts. From now until ten o’clock, convent schools will have the monopoly on education. Between ten and eleven o’clock the first cathedral schools will be founded, followed at noon by the first universities. The great Gothic cathedrals will be built at the same time. This church, too, dates from the 1200s—or what we call the High Gothic period. In this town they couldn’t afford a large cathedral.”

“They didn’t need one,” Sophie said. “I hate empty churches.”

“Ah, but the great cathedrals were not built only for large congregations. They were built to the glory of God and were in themselves a kind of religious celebration. However, something else happened during this period which has special significance for philosophers like us.”

Alberto continued: “The influence of the Arabs of Spain began to make itself felt. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Arabs had kept the Aristotelian tradition alive, and from the end of the twelfth century, Arab scholars began to arrive in Northern Italy at the invitation of the nobles. Many of Aristotle’s writings thus became known and were translated from Greek and Arabic into Latin. This created a new interest in the natural sciences and infused new life into the question of the Christian revelation’s relationship to Greek philosophy. Aristotle could obviously no longer be ignored in matters of science, but when should one attend to Aristotle the philosopher, and when should one stick to the Bible? Do you see?”

Sophie nodded, and the monk went on:

“The greatest and most significant philosopher of this period was St. Thomas Aquinas, who lived from 1225 to 1274. He came from the little town of Aquino, between Rome and Naples, but he also worked as a teacher at the University of Paris. I call him a philosopher but he was just as much a theologian. There was no great difference between philosophy and theology at that time. Briefly, we can say that Aquinas Christianized Aristotle in the same way that St. Augustine Christianized Plato in early medieval times.”

“Wasn’t it rather an odd thing to do, Christianizing philosophers who had lived several hundred years before Christ?”

“You could say so. But by ‘Christianizing’ these two great Greek philosophers, we only mean that they were interpreted and explained in such a way that they were no longer considered a threat to Christian dogma. Aquinas was among those who tried to make Aristotle’s philosophy compatible with Christianity. We say that he created the great synthesis between faith and knowledge. He did this by entering the philosophy of Aristotle and taking him at his word.”

“I’m sorry, but I had hardly any sleep last night. I’m afraid you’ll have to explain it more clearly.” “Aquinas believed that there need be no conflict between what philosophy or reason teaches us

and what the Christian Revelation or faith teaches us. Christendom and philosophy often say the same thing. So we can frequently reason ourselves to the same truths that we can read in the Bible.”

“How come? Can reason tell us that God created the world in six days or that Jesus was the Son of God?”

“No, those so-called verities of faith are only accessible through belief and the Christian Revelation. But Aquinas believed in the existence of a number of ‘natural theological truths.’ By that he meant truths that could be reached both through Christian faith and through our innate or natural reason. For example, the truth that there is a God. Aquinas believed that there are two paths to God. One path goes through faith and the Christian Revelation, and the other goes through reason and the senses. Of these two, the path of faith and revelation is certainly the surest, because it is easy to lose one’s way by trusting to reason alone. But Aquinas’s point was that there need not be any conflict between a philosopher like Aristotle and the Christian doctrine.”

“So we can take our choice between believing Aristotle and believing the Bible?”

“Not at all. Aristotle goes only part of the way because he didn’t know of the Christian revelation. But going only part of the way is not the same as going the wrong way. For example, it is not wrong to say that Athens is in Europe. But neither is it particularly precise. If a book only tells you that Athens is a city in Europe, it would be wise to look it up in a geography book as well. There you would find the whole truth that Athens is the capital of Greece, a small country in southeastern Europe. If you are lucky you might be told a little about the Acropolis as well. Not to mention Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.”

“But the first bit of information about Athens was true.”

“Exactly! Aquinas wanted to prove that there is only one truth. So when Aristotle shows us something our reason tells us is true, it is not in conflict with Christian teaching. We can arrive successfully at one aspect of the truth with the aid of reason and the evidence of our senses. For example, the kind of truths Aristotle refers to when he describes the plant and the animal kingdom. Another aspect of the truth is revealed to us by God through the Bible. But the two

aspects of the truth overlap at significant points. There are many questions about which the Bible and reason tell us exactly the same thing.”

“Like there being a God?”

“Exactly. Aristotle’s philosophy also presumed the existence of a God—or a formal cause—which sets all natural processes going. But he gives no further description of God. For this we must rely solely on the Bible and the teachings of Jesus.”

“Is it so absolutely certain that there is a God?”

“It can be disputed, obviously. But even in our day most people will agree that human reason is certainly not capable of disproving the existence of God. Aquinas went further. He believed that he could prove God’s existence on the basis of Aristotle’s philosophy.”

“Not bad!”

“With our reason we can recognize that everything around us must have a ‘formal cause,’ he believed. God has revealed himself to mankind both through the Bible and through reason. There is thus both a ‘theology of faith’ and a ‘natural theology.’ The same is true of the moral aspect. The Bible teaches us how God wants us to live. But God has also given us a conscience which enables us to distinguish between right and wrong on a ‘natural’ basis. There are thus also ‘two paths’ to a moral life. We know that it is wrong to harm people even if we haven’t read in the Bible that we must ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ Here, too, the surest guide is to follow the Bible’s commandment.”

“I think I understand,” said Sophie now. “It’s almost like how we know there’s a thunderstorm, by seeing the lightning and by hearing the thunder.”

“That’s right! We can hear the thunder even if we are blind, and we can see the lightning even if we are deaf. It’s best if we can both see and hear, of course. But there is no contradiction between what we see and what we hear. On the contrary—the two impressions reinforce each other.”

“I see.”

“Let me add another picture. If you read a novel— John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, for example ...”

“I’ve read that, actually.”

“Don’t you feel you know something about the author just by reading his book?” “I realize there is a person who wrote it.”

“Is that all you know about him?” “He seems to care about outsiders.”

“When you read this book—which is Steinbeck’s creation—you get to know something about Steinbeck’s nature as well. But you cannot expect to get any personal information about the author. Could you tell from reading *Of Mice and Men* how old the author was when he wrote it, where he lived, or how many children he had?”

“Of course not.”

“But you can find this information in a biography of John Steinbeck. Only in a biography—or an autobiography—can you get better acquainted with Steinbeck, the person.”

“That’s true.”

“That’s more or less how it is with God’s Creation and the Bible. We can recognize that there is a God just by walking around in the natural world. We can easily see that He loves flowers and animals, otherwise He would not have made them. But information about God, the person, is only found in the Bible—or in God’s ‘autobiography,’ if you like.”

“You’re good at finding examples.” “Mmmm...”

For the first time Alberto just sat there thinking—without answering.

“Does all this have anything to do with Hilde?” Sophie could not help asking. “We don’t know whether there is a ‘Hilde’ at all.”

“But we know someone is planting evidence of her all over the place. Postcards, a silk scarf, a green wallet, a stocking ...”

Alberto nodded. “And it seems as if it is Hilde’s father who is deciding how many clues he will plant,” he said. “For now, all we know is that someone is sending us a lot of postcards. I wish he would write something about himself too. But we shall return to that later.”

“It’s a quarter to eleven. I’ll have to get home before the end of the Middle Ages.”

“I shall just conclude with a few words about how Aquinas adopted Aristotle’s philosophy in all the areas where it did not

collide with the Church's theology. These included his logic, his theory of knowledge, and not least his natural philosophy. Do you recall, for example, how Aristotle described the progressive scale of life from plants and animals to humans?"

Sophie nodded.

"Aristotle believed that this scale indicated a God that constituted a sort of maximum of existence.

This scheme of things was not difficult to align with Christian theology. According to Aquinas, there was a progressive degree of existence from plants and animals to man, from man to angels, and from angels to God. Man, like animals, has a body and sensory organs, but man also has intelligence which enables him to reason things out.

Angels have no such body with sensory organs, which is why they have spontaneous and immediate intelligence. They have no need to 'ponder,' like humans; they have no need to reason out conclusions. They know everything that man can know without having to learn it step by step like us.

And since angels have no body, they can never die. They are not everlasting like God, because they were once created by God. But they have no body that they must one day depart from, and so they will never die."

"That sounds lovely!"

"But up above the angels, God rules, Sophie. He can see and know everything in one single coherent vision."

"So he can see us now."

"Yes, perhaps he can. But not 'now.' For God, time does not exist as it does for us. Our 'now' is not God's 'now.' Because many weeks pass for us, they do not necessarily pass for God."

"That's creepy!" Sophie exclaimed. She put her hand over her mouth. Alberto looked down at her, and Sophie continued: "I got another card from Hilde's father yesterday. He wrote something like— even if it takes a week or two for Sophie, that doesn't have to mean it will be that long for us. That's almost the same as what you said about God!"

Sophie could see a sudden frown flash across Alberto's face beneath the brown cowl. "He ought to be ashamed of himself!"

Sophie didn't quite understand what Alberto meant. He went on: "Unfortunately, Aquinas also adopted Aristotle's view of women. You may perhaps recall that Aristotle thought a woman was more or less an incomplete man. He also thought that children only inherit the father's characteristics, since a woman was passive and receptive while the man was active and creative. According to Aquinas, these views harmonized with the message of the Bible—which, for example, tells us that woman was made out of Adam's rib."

"Nonsense!"

"It's interesting to note that the eggs of mammals were not discovered until 1827. It was therefore perhaps not so surprising that people thought it was the man who was the creative and lifegiving force in reproduction. We can moreover note that, according to Aquinas, it is only as nature-being that woman is inferior to man. Woman's soul is equal to man's soul. In Heaven there is complete equality of the sexes because all physical gender differences cease to exist."

"That's cold comfort. Weren't there any women philosophers in the Middle Ages?"

"The life of the church in the Middle Ages was heavily dominated by men. But that did not mean that there were no women thinkers. One of them was Hildegard of Bingen..."

Sophie's eyes widened:

"Does she have anything to do with Hilde?"

"What a question! Hildegard lived as a nun in the Rhine Valley from 1098 to 1179. In spite of being a woman, she worked as preacher, author, physician, botanist, and naturalist. She is an example of the fact that women were often more practical, more scientific even, in the Middle Ages."

"But what about Hilde?"

"It was an ancient Christian and Jewish belief that God was not only a man. He also had a female side, or 'mother nature.' Women, too, are created in God's likeness. In Greek, this female side of God is called Sophia. 'Sophia' or 'Sophie' means wisdom."

Sophie shook her head resignedly. Why had nobody ever told her that? And why had she never asked?

Alberto continued: “Sophia, or God’s mother nature, had a certain significance both for Jews and in the Greek Orthodox Church throughout the Middle Ages. In the west she was forgotten. But along comes Hildegard. Sophia appeared to her in a vision, dressed in a golden tunic adorned with costly jewels ...”

Sophie stood up. Sophia had revealed herself to Hildegard in a vision ... “Maybe I will appear to Hilde.”

She sat down again. For the third time Alberto laid his hand on her shoulder.

“That is something we must look into. But now it is past eleven o’clock. You must go home, and we are approaching a new era. I shall summon you to a meeting on the Renaissance. Hermes will come get you in the garden.”

With that the strange monk rose and began to walk toward the church. Sophie stayed where she was, thinking about Hildegard and Sophia, Hilde and Sophie. Suddenly she jumped up and ran after the monk-robed philosopher, calling:

“Was there also an Alberto in the Middle Ages?”

Alberto slowed his pace somewhat, turned his head slightly and said, “Aquinas had a famous philosophy teacher called Albert the Great...”

With that he bowed his head and disappeared through the door of St. Mary’s Church.

Sophie was not satisfied with his answer. She followed him into the church. But now it was completely empty. Did he go through the floor?

Just as she was leaving the church she noticed a picture of the Madonna. She went up to it and studied it closely. Suddenly she discovered a little drop of water under one of the Madonna’s eyes. Was it a tear?

Sophie rushed out of the church and hurried back to Joanna’s.