European enquiry into the nature and meaning of the world started in ancient Greece. By the fourth century BC, a substantial body of philosophy emanated from several schools: from Thales and his followers in the city of Miletos in Ionia in Asia Minor, from the Pythagorean school in Croton (Crotone) in Calabria, and from the Eleatic School in Sicily. The Sophist philosophy of Protagoras, Hippon, Cratylus, and others was to create much controversy and opposition later. Interestingly, deliberations of the earliest philosophers focused on the physical world: in respect they were protoscientists; with time their natural philosophy evolved into science (1).

In the fifth to the fourth centuries BC the Athenian city-state, then at the peak of its political power, became the intellectual center of the Greek world. This is mainly due to the succession of three men: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (2, 3).

Socrates did not leave a written legacy. We know of his philosophy through his pupil, Plato. Aristotle, who had studied with Plato (indeed he was Plato’s most brilliant student, whom Plato nicknamed the Mind), had developed his own enormous body of work, which had a major impact on the philosophy of the Middle Ages and beyond (4).

Plato was born in 420s BC in Athens and died there in 348 or 347 BC. Reportedly, he travelled widely and studied mathematics in Italy and astronomy in Egypt. He wrote his treatises in the form of dialogues: this was both an enticing literary form and a device to make the proposed arguments open to the reader’s interpretation. Socrates features prominently in the early dialogues (the Apology is one of them), and they are broadly regarded as the account of the Socratic philosophy. In the later, so-called Middle Dialogues, Socrates’ voice diminishes. Probably Plato’s best-known dialogue is the Republic, in which he discusses knowledge, justice, and government among other issues. In Book VII Plato formulates the concept of two worlds, of which one is real and the other ideal. The concepts and ideas in the real world, he says, are only an inadequate reflection of the ideal Forms (7). Curiously, the Later Dialogues contain what might at least be a partial retreat from the theory of Forms; there is also little presence of Socrates, and discussion of the works of other philosophers is more prominent. The mosaic of the Dialogues, their classification and chronology, are still the subject of scholarly debates.

Plato travelled to Sicily 389 BC, returned to Athens in 387 BC, and subsequently founded his Academy, which could be regarded as the first institution of higher learning in the Western civilization. The Academy was a place of gatherings for readings, lectures, and debates, although there was never a defined curriculum. The range of subjects taught was remarkable: from philosophy of government, justice, and ethics to mathematics and astronomy. Most of the later eminent Greek mathematicians were trained there. The debates were facilitated by the position of a reader, who recited the manuscripts aloud before discussion. Plato stresses the importance of the discussion as opposed to gaining knowledge solely from reading. The academy aimed high: Plato wanted to educate rulers to become “philosopher kings.” He held that knowledge was essential to a good government. In terms of the physical space, at the beginning the Academy was a walled piece of land northwest of the Acropolis, then just outside the city walls (today it is the Keramikos area of Athens). It first looked much like other Greek gymnasia, places where education and physical exercise were combined. There was an olive grove dedicated to the goddess of wisdom, Athena (8, 9). Later a surrounding stoa was constructed, statues of the muses were acquired, and dedicated buildings were erected, one with reading rooms and a substantial library of papyri. Plato, it is told, paid large sums of money to acquire desired manuscripts (4).

The Academy survived politically turbulent times. Athenian power waned as a result of the exhausting Peloponnesian war with Sparta in 409–404 BC, and in 335 BC Athens was conquered by Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great.

The Academy functioned under Plato’s successors until 86 BC, when it was destroyed by the Roman general Lucius Cornelius Sulla during his siege of Athens.Scholars moved to different sites in the city. The Academy was not restored until AD 410, when it was revived by the
Neoplatonists, who called themselves the successors (diasdochoi) of Plato and kept attracting philosophers from the wider Hellenistic world (9, 10). It lasted until AD 529 when, being a non-Christian school, it was closed by the Byzantine emperor Justinian I. Most of its scholars migrated to Persia. Plato’s oeuvre was translated into Arabic, and Neoplatonism resurfaced in Baghdad.

In the fifth and sixth centuries elements of Platonism were incorporated into Christian theology by thinkers such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite. After the fall of the Byzantine Empire, Plato’s manuscripts were brought to Venice. In 1484 his works were translated into Latin in Florence by Marsilio Ficino.

This reinsertion of the classical philosophy into Western culture is beautifully illustrated by the painting shown in Fig. 1, created in 1510–1511. It is now known as The School of Athens and was painted by one of the three greatest masters of the Italian Renaissance, Raphael Sanzio of Urbino (1509–1510) on request of Pope Julius II. It is in the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican, in a room known as Stanza della Segnatura (11, 12). Giorgio Vasari, in his Lives of the Artists published in 1568, described the painting as a general account of philosophy. It has also been interpreted as an attempt to reconcile ancient philosophy with Christianity (13). The central figures there, framed by the arch, are Plato (on the left), holding his Timaeus dialogue, and Aristotle with a copy of Nicomachean Ethics. Several other philosophers have been identified in the picture, and it supposedly also contains images of Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael himself, and the architect Donato Bramante (12).

In a world of fast-moving science we do not usually dwell on the extent to which our approach to knowledge and its transmission has been formed by intellectuals who lived more than 2000 years ago. And perhaps, occasionally, we should.

Fig. 1. School of Athens, from the Stanza della Segnatura, 1510–1511 (fresco), Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio of Urbino) (1483–1520)/Vatican Museums and Galleries, Vatican City/Bridgeman Images. ©Reproduced with permission.

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