The Wisdom of Socrates

Cosmology
Sophists
Socrates's Life and Character

I. Greek philosophy began with cosmological speculations.
   A. Cosmology is the study of the universe as a system.
      1. Thales (THAY-lees, 600 BC) claimed the world is made of water.
      2. Later cosmologists identified four basic elements: earth, air, fire and water.
   B. Explaining reality's underlying unity led to the problem of "The One and The Many."
      1. If the universe made of One substance like water, then how do we get Many different
         substances, like earth and air?
      2. If there are Many basic substances, then what One thing allows them all to interact?
   C. A related problem of "Change and Permanence":
      1. Heraclitus of Ephesus (hair-a-CLY-tus, 540-480 BC) claimed there is one element of
         the cosmos: fire.
         a. Fire is the most volatile element, constantly changing.
         b. "One cannot step into the same river twice."
      2. Parmenides (par-MEN-a-dees, 6th-5th c BC) claimed all change is illusion.
         a. Reality must be only One, and so permanent.
         b. There is no non-being, so nothing can become something that does not exist.

II. Philosophers known as "Sophists" emphasized logic and rhetoric over cosmology.
   A. Sophists denied philosophical reasoning can settle factual questions.
      1. They declared the problem of One and Many insoluble.
      2. Reasoning one way Heraclitus calls permanence illusory; reasoning another way,
         Parmenides claims change is illusory.
   B. Sophists valued philosophical thinking, not for finding truth, but for persuading.
   C. They favored studies in law and politics over physics.

III. Socrates challenged the view that philosophy is good for nothing but persuading others to accept
      your opinions.
   A. Socrates' life and character are legendary:
      1. He was reputed to be the wisest man, but ironically he did not believe it.
         a. He found that others--poets, politicians, technicians--claimed to have
            knowledge they did not have.
         b. He distinguished between knowing an art or science, and knowing about one's
            own knowledge.
      2. He wrote no philosophy, but developed a method of teaching:
         a. The Socratic Method does not present claims or theses to be defended.
         b. Socrates acted as a "mid-wife," helping others realize truths they already know.
      3. His death by execution in 399 BC inspired Plato and other philosophers.
         a. He was unjustly convicted.
         b. He chose execution over banishment for his penalty.
         c. Given opportunities to escape, he insisted it would be wrong.