Well, let's go back to the very beginning - the birth of philosophy in ancient Greece. Why did it happen? Well, who knows? It's a very interesting and important fact about history that philosophy, as we understand it, seems to have been born only once. For some reason, the ancient Greeks, instead of relying purely on historical and religious myths, started to ask about how they could understand the world rationally - not relying on tradition, but relying on reason.

In ancient Greece, there were many different philosophers and many different schools. Plato and Aristotle are obviously the most familiar today for a reason that we'll come to, but there were lots of others. The pre-Socratic philosophers, the philosophers who preceded Socrates, Socrates himself, who was the great teacher of Plato. Plato founded his Academy, from where the word ""academic"" comes. The Academy actually persisted for 800 years, and there were quite a lot of different philosophers through that period. Aristotle founded his own school, the Lyceum, and again, various philosophers came out of that. There were various groups of skeptics, notably the Pyrrhonian skeptics, named after the philosopher Pyrrho.

Pyrrho, allegedly, was so skeptical that he saw no reason for believing that falling off cliffs was dangerous or that collisions with chariots were dangerous. So, allegedly, he had to be followed around everywhere by his friends who would pull him out of the way whenever he got near a cliff or whenever a chariot came into view. He's supposed to have lived to over 90, so I think his friends were quite successful. Or maybe those stories aren't entirely true.

The Epicurean philosophers and the Stoic philosophers were also very famous schools of philosophy. So, there was a huge variety of philosophy in ancient Greece.

Now, unfortunately for philosophy, the Roman Empire became Christianized, starting with Constantine. Later Roman emperors thought it was their moral and religious duty to actually close down the ancient schools of philosophy. For example, a lot of libraries were destroyed in 391 AD, in particular, the famous Library of Alexandria, which contained a huge number of ancient writings from these Greeks. And not only philosophical Greeks, but also many great literary figures from the ancient world. A huge number of their works were burned and we know about them only by report. Sometimes fragments of these are discovered.

Now ways are being found to actually recreate some texts, even from burnt fragments. In 529 AD, all of the non-Christian schools were closed down. Plato's Academy, which had been going for all those hundreds of years, was closed. As a result, we have very few texts from these ancient philosophers. The ancient skeptics, for example, their work is primarily known through only three texts: one of them is Sextus Empiricus' ""Outlines of Pyrrhonism"", another is Cicero's ""Academica"", and the third is a work by a chap called Diogenes Laërtius who wrote lives of the great philosophers, with lots of little snippets describing their interesting lives and deaths.

For example, one of them allegedly jumped into a volcano to prove that he was a God. I don't think the proof worked! Another one got dropsy and, in order to cure himself, covered himself with dung and lay down in the marketplace. And apparently, the local dogs, not realizing what it was, came along and ate him. So, for many of these ancient philosophers, all we know about them is a few snippets in Diogenes Laërtius. And given that kind of story, you can see that we can't view them with tremendous authority.

Plato and Aristotle were somewhat privileged. Plato, very early on, played a part in the development of Christian doctrine. If you look at Christian doctrines such as the Incarnation and the Trinity, there are clear signs of platonic thought. Aristotle became a great authority in the later medieval period, most famously through Aquinas. If you've seen the film ""The Name of the Rose"" or read the book, for example, you see the sort of veneration with which Aristotle was held in the later medieval period. And this synthesis of Christianity and Aristotelianism became totally dominant in the medieval monastic schools, and so we get scholasticism. Scholasticism was the movement based on Aristotle, but developed beyond Aristotle, incorporated into Christianity, and taught as orthodoxy throughout Christendom.

Now, here is a sketch of Aristotle's universe. You'll see that in the story that follows, astronomy plays quite a significant role. That might seem surprising, but I'm sure you'll understand soon. The Aristotelian worldview obviously places the earth right at the center. The earth is surrounded by water, or largely surrounded by water. Beyond that, we have the sphere of air, then fire, then the sphere of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, and so on. The outermost crystalline sphere contains the fixed stars, and these rotate around us, which is why we see the stars moving in the sky.

There's a sharp difference between everything below the sphere of the moon and things outside. Below, in the sublunary world, we have change, decay, the sorts of things that we are familiar with in the world. Beyond the Moon, everything is perfect. Things move in perfect circles, they are unchanging. That's the heavenly sphere. And we'll see that it was really the breaking apart of this picture that played a very major role in the development of modern philosophy.

A number of things came about in the years between about 1400 and 1500 and the few decades thereafter which completely changed this intellectual landscape. Well, some ancient texts had survived. I've mentioned some of those that did, like Sextus Empiricus' ""Outlines of Pyrrhonism"", containing all these skeptical arguments that had been developed in ancient Greece. Those were lost, but some of these manuscripts remained in the Byzantine world in Constantinople. Some were translated by the Arabs and preserved in the Arabic world. Well, eventually the Ottoman Turks attacked Constantinople, it eventually fell, and at that point, and prior to that, a lot of scholars fled to the West, bringing these precious manuscripts with them. So, a lot of these things were rediscovered. I find it extremely interesting that manuscripts that had been hidden away all that time had this dynamite within them, such that rediscovery of them could have such a profound effect on the Western world. It really does show the value of what had been going on in ancient Greece. Their philosophical discoveries still have this power to unsettle the world.

So, you have the development of humanism in Renaissance Italy - a new respect for classical thought. People were trying to think through things in this new way which was not totally dominated by Christian Aristotelianism. Printing was invented in 1450, so these manuscripts suddenly got circulated very quickly amongst scholars in Western Europe. Lucretius' ""De Rerum Natura"" (The Nature of the Universe) was rediscovered in 1417 and printed in 1486. Sextus Empiricus' works that I mentioned were translated into Latin in 1562.

Lots of other things happened at this time. For example, the population was growing and there was a lot of trade, including trade with other countries. There was the discovery of the New World in 1492, when Columbus sailed to America. This brought a lot of economic disruption. They discovered a lot of silver in South America and started bringing it back to Europe, causing all sorts of economic complications. Of course, they didn't realize what was causing this, but there was a lot of upheaval, a lot of change as a result. The realization that ancient maps were wrong. For centuries, people had been going along thinking that Aristotle and the Bible, between them, contained more or less the whole truth. And yet, suddenly, here we are discovering whole new parts of the world that aren't mentioned at all by Aristotle or the Bible. It's bound to cast some doubt on the ancient authorities.

Cultural relativity - you start meeting people who have other religious beliefs or other scientific beliefs. They don't think the way we do. Well, that's bound to make you ask, if you're at all reflective, how confident can we be that our views are right and theirs are wrong?

Technology - gunpowder, centralization of power. Again, you might wonder, what difference does it make? Once gunpowder has been discovered, it is no longer the case that somebody can simply sit walled up in their castle and wait for the enemy to go away. Fundamental change in the technology of warfare inevitably brings big political differences. And the very fact that Constantinople had fallen was partly due to this discovery.

So, some of these things, you might think, well, how can they have an effect on the history of thought? Well, the effect is to cause this massively complicated upheaval in all sorts of areas of life. Suddenly, doubt is cast on all sorts of assumptions that people have taken for granted for generations. A nice example of this, I think, is the Mappa Mundi. This is a famous map in Hereford that dates from about 1290 and it's based on the writings of Isidore of Seville, who was a pupil of St. Augustine. So, this was based on a theory going back about 800 years, and the view of the world had basically not changed over that time.

That's the whole world. Jerusalem is at the center of it. Now, imagine that you have that kind of teaching that's come down for all those many hundreds of years, completely unchanged. And then, suddenly, people start bringing back stories of new distant lands, like America, with lots of tangible evidence of a very different new world. It's bound to have a profound effect on your worldview.

And then, of course, along came the Reformation. In 1517, Luther rebelled against the Church of Rome. Quite a number of things, one of them was his objection to the selling of indulgences. If you were a churchman, you could get one of your parishioners, who had done something wrong, to pay lots of money to the church, and it would go better for them in the afterlife. This was clearly an abuse, it was very widespread, and it's one of the things Luther protested against. Many parts of Europe, especially Northern Europe, quickly became Protestant. Of course, Luther wasn't the only influence. There were others like Calvin and John Knox, but you ended up getting huge savage wars - the Thirty Years' War, which was mainly fought over German lands, and the civil war in England. These were extremely vicious, nasty wars going on for a long time, setting family against family and so forth. In 1648, you get a peace eventually, but it's described as a peace of exhaustion. People are so fed up with all the religious war, they don't want to go on killing each other. There isn't really a settlement in any theoretical sense. It's not as though one side wins and the other loses. They just agree to differ. In the German lands, there's an agreement that essentially everybody has to obey the religion of their prince. So, if I live in a particular area and my prince happens to go Roman Catholic or Protestant, I have to follow. And that clearly is just a compromise intended to stop the killing.

Now, imagine, in the middle of all this, you read stuff written by these ancient skeptics, in particular Sextus Empiricus, and you naturally get to asking yourself this sort of skeptical question: the problem of the criterion. Okay, I'm faced with two different people. One person says the criterion of truth is religious tradition as taught by the church. The other person says the criterion of truth is the Word of God acting on you when you read the Bible. Okay, how do I know which criterion is right? I've got the Roman Catholic criterion, I've got the Protestant criterion. What I'm looking for is some criterion in between them, but that is to ask for exactly the thing that I'm looking for. How can any criterion of reliable knowledge be chosen unless we already have some reliable criterion for making that choice?

So, this was a problem highlighted by the ancient skeptics and communicated to modern ages by Sextus Empiricus. It had a big, very profound effect.