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## Wisdom (Sophia) in the Philosophical Train

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**Abstract:** *Sophie's World* is a philosophical and mystery novel that takes one on a historical journey beginning from ancient western philosophy up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The article revolves around a fourteen-year-old school girl, Sophie Amundsen. Another major character in the novel is Alberto Knox. A kind and brilliant philosopher, he also holds a mysterious and secretive demeanour. Unknown to everyone he seems to be non-existent to the eyes of the living world. Both of them embark on the study of philosophy, only to discover that they are nothing more than the fictional characters of the novel about the history of philosophy. Unlike the normal way of teaching Alberto uses an unusual teaching method, writing a letter and making Sophie read. Another interesting aspect of this article is the underlying mystery of the postcards present, which slowly rises

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to the limelight, becoming one with the philosophical aspect. Hilde, on the other hand, whom we meet halfway through the article, appears to be a real girl whose father has written a novel entitled *Sophie's world*. This article gives one a wider perspective of western philosophy.

**Keywords:** Sophie's Word, Jostein Gaarder, Sophie Amundsen, Hilde Moller Knag, Alberto Knox, Albert Knag.

## Introduction

It is one of the greatest philosophical fiction of our time, very intelligently written. *Sophie's World* describes the story of Sophie Amundsen, a 14-year-old girl and Albert Knox, a philosopher who introduces her to a philosophical way of thinking. It follows Sophie's journey into a world of philosophy, learning about the history of philosophy from the pre-Socratic to Jean-Paul Sartre.

The novel opens up with the conversation between Sophie and friend Joanna while returning from school. Henceforth, the philosophical journey of Sophie begins. As Sophie opens the gate, "she sees the mail box where she finds a white envelope, read, Sophie Amundsen, 3 Clovers Close. It did not say who it was, where it was from, there was no stamp on it either. As soon as she entered her room, she opened the envelope. It contained only a slip of paper no bigger than the envelope. It read who are you?" (Gaarder, 1994: 6). This question made her think as well as puzzled her. These questions are easy to ask and almost impossible to answer, but what is most amazing of all these is, people seldom ask such questions. And the following day, she receives the same kind of envelope which read, "Is there life after death?" (Gaarder, 1994:7). This made her think even harder, but it was impossible to get an answer to those questions. One cannot

experience being alive without realizing that you have to die. But it is just as impossible to realize you have died without thinking how incredibly amazing it is to be alive. How tragic that most people had to get ill before they understood what a gift it was to be alive. She was startled to find another envelope, exactly like the first. And she opened and fished out a note the same size as the first one. It said, where does the world come from, perhaps, she thought it was right to question, to know otherwise one does not deserve to live in this world. She was confused and so went to her den in the garden which was her hiding place.

The next morning, there's no letter waiting for Sophie, when she returns from school. she finds a letter in the mailbox from her dad, and Sophie also finds another letter from her unknown philosopher friend. She begins to read it, and it begins with the mythological world about the ancient Greek, a contrast between religious thinking and philosophical thinking. Now people began to deify natural phenomenon like thunder, lightning to God. This is not to say that religion and philosophy cannot co-exist, but in most cultures, religion always proceeded philosophy. Just like in India Buddhism and Hinduism how religion and philosophy co-exist. Having read myths of ancient civilization, Sophie fakes a break and tries to make sense of what she's read so far (Gaarder, 1996:26). However, it is important to remember that Sophie keeps her education as a secret from her mother. When Sophie's Mom sees the letter, she assumes that Sophie has gotten a love letter from someone at school. Sophie does not bother to correct her mother, perhaps she does not know how to explain that she's receiving a letter from a philosopher. In her room, she opens the envelope, inside she finds a small card with three questions on it. 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? (Gaarder, 1994:29). These questions may

sound frivolous, even if we literally believe a philosopher's idea, we can find some truth there.

### The Philosophers Project

When Sophie gets home from school, she finds a large envelope waiting for her, inside, she finds a letter titled the philosopher's project. The letter promises to go over, very quickly, the major changes in philosophy from the ancient Greeks up to the present day. Whoever is writing these letters has a conscious plan for Sophie's education (Gaarder, 1994: 31). He is put a lot of thought into teaching Sophie the history of Western philosophy and this, in turn, becomes a lesson for us the readers. The letter begins by talking about the natural philosophers, often considered the earliest philosophers this passage is very important because it establishes one of the guiding principles of Sophie's education. One of the most basic assumptions about the world was that there had to be an essential substance from which all living things were made. Although many of the Greeks ideas about life seem ridiculous by modern standards, they are still important to study (Gaarder, 1994: 32).

One of the natural philosophers' greatest achievements was liberating philosophy from religion. Some of the significant natural philosophers were Thales, Anaximenes, Anaximander and Parmenides and Heraclitus. One of the liveliest debates of the ancient world concerned was the distinction between change and constancy. On the one hand, Parmenides made a basic distinction, that the world appeared to be, and

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what it truly was. Parmenides said that reality is permanent and does not change, but Heraclitus opposing this said, we are in constant flux, change is the law of life. 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 know that the notion gradually evolved there must be a basic substance that was the hidden cause of all change in nature. All these thoughts kept her thinking. Even as Sophie learns about Greeks who challenged the authority of the God's and of fate. It begins to seem that Sophie's own life is dominated by fate an unseen figure who controls everything. Later in the day, Sophie finds a small letter waiting for her, in the letter the philosopher apologizes for being unable to see Sophie in person. But the good thing for Sophie is the letter is signed by Albert Knox, which means, Albert Knox is the man who educates her in philosophy (Gaarder, 1994: 32-36).

### **The Philosophy of Athens**

The next day, a Labrador arrives outside Sophie's house, carrying an envelope in its mouth. Sophie realizes this Labrador as Alberto's messenger (Gaarder, 1994: 58). The letter begins by introducing Sophie to Sophists. For many years the most influential teachers in Athens were Sophists wandering teachers and philosophers. One of the most influential philosophers in Athens was Socrates is an interesting figure because of his modesty unlike most intelligent people, who refused to admit it. There was no one intelligent like him in Athens, unlike Sophists, Socrates didn't claim any great knowledge of the world, on the contrary, he claimed he knew nothing, perhaps this sets a proper philosophical mindset (Brainy Quotes, 2021). The idea of being certain about the world, Alberto, suggests is toxic to philosophy. A wise person acknowledges that he or she knows

next to nothing about the world. 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. Thus, the wisest man is he who knows that he knows nothing (Gaarder, 1994: 61-66).

### Plato's Academy

Outside, Sophie hears a dog panting she finds Hermes, bearing an envelope. She takes the envelope, then she tries to follow Hermes away from her house, but she finds that she's too slow to chase him. Sophie proceeds with the letter, titled, Plato's Academy. Plato believed that the material world is constantly changing. But the world of thoughts and ideas doesn't change at all. Plato was very much interested in the world of ideas and this made him say that this was unreal. Sophie is not sure if she agrees with Plato about the world of ideas (Meinwald, 2016). And she continues to treat her philosophical education with healthy scepticism. Sophie walks down the path away from her house. She notices a small lake, that she's never seen before. She paddles across the water and arrives at the cabin there, she sees in the cabin a brass mirror, a type writer and paintings of a man titled Bjerkley (Gaarder, 1994: 88-89). The paintings and the brass mirror are important symbols of introspection and self-study. The strange co-incidence keeps adding up. Sophie also continues to find a piece of evidence linking her to Hilde Moller Knag a mysterious character in the novel and a girl we know nothing about (Gaarder, 1994: 90). There's a ticking clock in this novel as Sophie's birthday gets closer and closer, her mom asks about the upcoming birthday party. Sophie seems indifferent to that. Later in the

afternoon, Sophie sees Hermes near her den, carrying a new envelope. Inside the envelope, there's an extra letter in addition to the usual one. In this extra letter, Alberto forgives Sophie for entering his cabin without his permission (Gaarder, 1994:96).

## Philosopher and Scientists

Aristotle, the letter begins, was a pupil of Plato. It's been said that all human beings are either Platonists and Aristotelians. Aristotle, with his emphasis on the real, concrete world, is often praised for being the first true scientists. Aristotle seems to be relevant to Sophie's than Plato who emphasized the unreal; unlike Plato, Aristotle's views on women were 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. Back in her room, Sophie begins putting together Alberto's letters to form a single book on philosophy. She looks forward to her next letter and ignores it. The fact that she has homework to do for school. The mystery builds, as Sophie can't make sense of the letters she's receiving from Lebanon, is addressed to Hilde Moller Knag, via Sophie Amundsen. It seems fair to say that no philosopher during the Hellenistic period could rival Plato or Aristotle (Gaarder, 1994: 107).

It's May 16, and Sophie and Joanna have planned to go camping, Sophie does not hear from Alberto in a few days. Sophie does not tell, Joanna that she's been there before since this would involve explaining Alberto Knox. Joanna and Sophie sneak into the cabin where they find a pile of postcards. Joanna reads one postcard, which is addressed to Hilde, explains that 'Dad' is under military command in Lebanon and won't be able to travel to Hilde's birthday. Joanna and Sophie have no idea what to make of this figure who seems to have the power to manipulate the entire world (Gaarder, 1994:109).

As Sophie continues learning about philosophy, she becomes more aware of her world, not just her home and hometown, her country, and her country's relationship with the entire world. Another week passes, Sophie hears from Alberto again. The phone rings and Sophie answers it. Alberto Knox is on the phone; he greets Sophie by name. he tells Sophie that they must meet in person so that they can attract Hilde's attention. Sophie agrees to meet Albert at a nearby church the next morning. In Sophie's first real interaction with Alberto, she learns about the middle ages and nothing about Alberto himself, who remains as mysterious as ever (Gaarder,1994:110-114). During the middle ages, one of the key figures who reconciled Aristotle and Plato with Christ was St. Augustine. He shows that human beings have the freedom to make their own decisions, even though there is an all-powerful God who controls everything in the universe. One might well ask, then, if Sophie is free to control her own actions or if she, too is controlled by Hilde's all-powerful father. As Alberto falls silent, Sophie asks him about Hilde. Alberto explains "we don't know whether there is a Hilde at all." Once again Alberto shows that he knows more about what's going on than he's willing to say. Alberto next begins to tell Sophie about the Renaissance, the period of European history following the middle ages. Renaissance means rebirth, suggesting that Europe was recovering its connection to the culture of antiquity. Alberto tells Sophie that the renaissance was proof of the success of thinkers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. After this Sophie does not hear from Alberto for a few more days. To explain her absence to mom, she says that Hermes belongs to her old science teacher with whom she had a long chat (Gaarder, 1994: 194-198).



## Modern Philosophers

Alberto takes Sophie to Modern philosophers. Alberto begins telling Sophie about Descartes. Descartes is one of the most original thinkers since Plato. Descartes resembles early rationalists' thinkers like Parmenides, who ignored what their senses told them and instead listened to what their minds told them. Descartes tried to work forward from his zero point. He doubted everything, and that was the only thing he was certain of. But now something struck him. One thing had to be true, and that was that he doubted. When he doubted, he had to be thinking and because he was thinking, it had to be certain that he was a thinking being. "cogito Ergo Sum." (Gaarder, 1994:221). Once again Sophie's philosophical education is explicitly tied to the real life mysterious, she's trying to solve. As she finds another note wishing Hilde's father promises her that the moment of truth is near at hand. Alberto and Sophie are still in Alberto's Apartment. They stare out the window and see an aeroplane pulling a banner across the sky. The banner says, HAPPY BIRTHDAY HILDE (Gaarder,1994:268). Sophie begins to feel odd; she thinks of all the strange things that have been happening to her lately. Hilde's father seems to be everywhere. Thus, Alberto suddenly addresses Sophie as Hilde and explains that he's always known Sophie's true name as Hilde. He says that Hilde's father the major, is a kind of God to Sophie and Alberto and Hilde is a kind of angel. The physical world through which Sophie and Alberto are moving may be real or it may be nothing more than paper and writing. The product of Hilde's father's imagination. Alberto then tells Sophie, Happy Birthday Hilde! Suddenly it starts to storm outside. Sophie runs away from Alberto and returns home (Gaarder,1994: 269-270).

Now the secret is out, Gaarder takes us to the other world Alberto kept alluding to, the world where Hilde lives. Hilde

stares into her brass Mirror, this mirrors Sophie and we finally see the other end of this magical mirror, Hilde was the one blinking back to Sophie. The truth is now clear, Albert, the major has written *Sophie's World*, the book we have been reading so far with the intention of educating not Sophy but Hilde about philosophy. Furthermore, Albert has modelled the character of Sophie on his own daughter. This is a surprising and entertaining twist. In essence, *Sophie's World* is acknowledging that it's just a work of fiction and beyond that, it's a meta fiction partly about the philosophy that reality might be an illusion. One interesting question this fiction brings up is; is Sophie more or less 'real' than Hilde? From the readers' point of view, Sophie is more real to us than Hilde (Arn, 2021).

Now the readers are clear it is Hilde who is reading the book, she continues to do it in the same way. Hilde's father teaches her daughter philosophy in the form of a novel (Gaarder,1994:278). Hilde eats dinner with her mother and confesses that she just wants to go back and read the rest of the book her father wrote. The phone rings in Sophie's world and Sophie picks it up. It is Alberto who explains to Sophie that he

The defining theme of Sophie's world is, clearly philosophy. Added to the theme of philosophy we have many other themes that run throughout the novel, some of them include wisdom and wonder, the nature of reality, education and Mentorship, freewill, women and sexism.

and Sophie are not real but only characters that exist only in the mind of major. By this point, there is no mystery about it. Sophie and Alberto know that they are trapped in Albert's book. Alberto thinks he has a plan for escaping from Albert, precisely by using Albert's intentions against

him. Hilde finishes reading almost three fourth of *Sophie's World*. She finds it is odd that Sophie and Alberto are becoming aware of their fictional nature. Now that Albert knows that Sophie knows the truth about the reality, he can be more upfront about his control of Sophie's world and she has no choice but to comply. Albert Knag, Hilde's father, calls Hilde into her house to wish her a happy birthday. This is the major moment the first time Albert speaks aloud. Hilde also confesses that she is beginning to think of Sophie as a real person. The novel becomes increasingly fantastical and increasingly fictional in other words Sophie can no longer ignore the fact that we are reading a work of fiction. Instead of tricking his reader, into thinking that this is real, Gaarder wants the readers to actively question the nature of reality.

Again, one afternoon Alberto and Sophie meet up in the major's cabin, Alberto explains that he's going to tell Sophie about the history of Romanticism. Romanticism borrows many of the basic tenses of enlightenment philosophy, yet critiques the enlightenment for valuing reason more highly than emotion. The fairy tale was the absolute literary ideal of the romantics in the same way that the absolute art form of the Baroque period was the theatre. It gave the poet full scope to explore his creativity. Hilde's fascination with Sophie leads her to believe that she and Sophie are equally alive and equally free. Hilde continues to ignore her mother, showing that her allegiances now seem to lie with a fictional girl, not a flesh and blood woman. Alberto continues with his teaching; he tries to explain how Kierkegaard ideas work in practice. For Kierkegaard, there is no universal truth every person has their version of the truth, which makes sense to them and no one else. Kierkegaard believed that all human beings live in three stages of lives; aesthetic, ethical and religious. Having said this he stresses that Kierkegaard is often credited with pioneering existentialism, one of the key intellectual movements of the

20<sup>th</sup> century. Hilde finishes reading the chapter on Kierkegaard. Inspired by Sophie and Alberto, Hilde decides to give her father a ‘scare’ when he returns from Lebanon (Gaarder,1994:378-379). Later on, in the day, Hilde continues reading the book, Sophie proceeds to the cabin where she finds Alberto waiting for her, perhaps who acts as a kind of encyclopedia for the oddities of the book. He goes on to explain the philosophy of Karl Marx (Gaarder.1994:387). As the book reaches its conclusion, we notice a major conflict in Sophie’s education; the conflicts between materialism and idealism, while reading the book Hilde falls asleep. The next day she continues to read, here Alberto teaches Sophie, one important strain of Modern Philosophy, he begins existentialism, existentialism is the belief that man’s existential situation must be the starting point for any system of thought. One of the key existentialists was Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre philosophy contradicts much of what we’ve been discussing in this book so far. Unlike enlightenment or even Romantic philosophers, Sartre does not believe that it’s productive to begin a discussion of humanity by talking about its perceptual capabilities, or any definition of human nature. Sartre is even more committed to the concepts of freedom than his predecessors. He wants each human being to find his or her freedom. This idea also seems relevant to the novel. Sophie has accepted that she exists only in the pages of a book so now she must go

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about finding freedom and meaning within the parameters of reality. Having said about Sartre, Alberto buys a coke for Sophie and a coffee for himself. When he purchased both items, he tells Sophie that brings us to the end of the road. Alberto is too wise to claim that Sophie is now educated in all western philosophy (Gaarder,1994:460-464).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this book has not, in fact, been to give a total summary of western thinking; rather it's aimed to convey some of the narrative sweeps of philosophy's history. For example, to show how enlightenment influenced Romanticism, or how Romanticism influenced the rise of existentialism. Throughout the book, Alberto has been trying to refute the idea that philosophy is a useless endeavour. Here, he shows the ways that philosophy, far from being useless, is intimately engaged with the problems of the real contemporary world.

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