

SOCRATES & THE SOPHISTS

HZT4U1 - MR. A. WITTMANN - UNIT 1 - LECTURE 5



“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Plato, Crito

“As for me, all I know is that I know nothing.”

Plato, Republic

Socrates, father of western philosophy

The Sophists (429–347 BC)

- ◆ The next phase of western philosophy, after the Presocratics, is dominated by the Sophists.
- ◆ They represent a shift in thinking and mark the transition between the Presocratics and Socrates
- ◆ Turned away from science, the physical or metaphysical and focused on human activities/institutions.

The Sophists (continued)

- ◆ Sophists were not a group of like mind thinkers, but a professional class of independent rival teachers.
- ◆ They worked throughout the Greek world, gave lectures, taking pupils, teaching rhetoric, politics, grammar, history, physics, mathematics, and mediated disputes.

The Sophists (continued)

- ◆ With the rise of democracy, aristocratic politicians needed to persuade the multitude to ensure political success.
- ◆ Thus sophists concentrated on teaching rhetoric, providing arguments on any subject proving any position, whether you are knowledgeable on subject or not.

The Sophists (continued)

- ◆ 3 common themes run through their diverse views, which constitute a response to the Presocratics (nihilism, humanism, immoralism).

Protagoras (c.490-420 BC)

Gorgias (c.485-380 BC)

Hippias (c.465-390 BC)

Prodicus (c.465-390 BC)

Antiphon (c.485-390 BC)

Thrasymachus (c.465-390 BC)

1. Nihilistic Theme

- ◆ No absolute truth, so the search for truth or the nature of the universe is pointless.
- ◆ No metaphysical gap between perception and reality.
- ◆ No absolute morality.
- ◆ Philosophy is the art of persuasion, not truth seeking.
- ◆ Because equally valid arguments can given for any conclusion.

2. Humanistic Theme

- ◆ Protagoras: “man is the measure of all things”, only human activities and institutions matter.
- ◆ Human-centric universe; humanism over naturalism.
- ◆ Professed to teach human arete or human (male) virtue or excellence to the aristoi (vs. kakoi).
- ◆ Taught young men how to be successful leaders, fully engaged in human society.

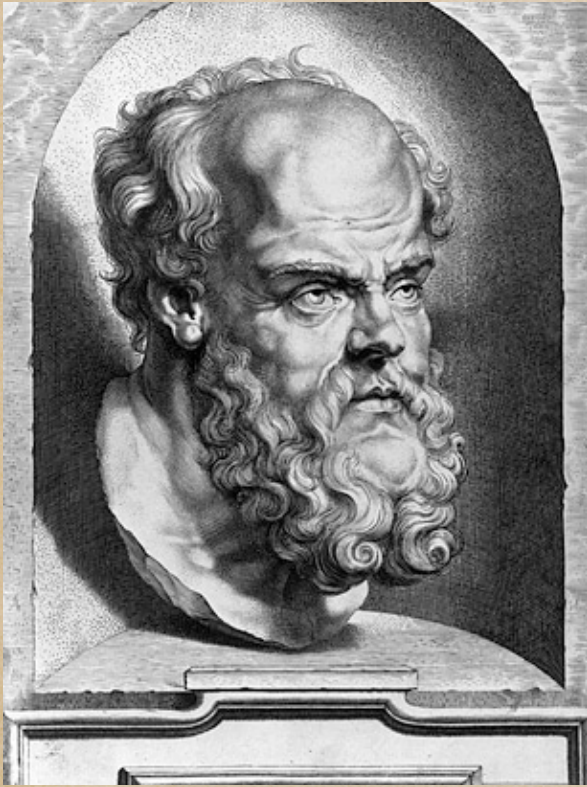
3. Immoral Theme

- ◆ These 2 themes bred a sort of immoralism, which was contrary with traditional Greek values of morality (i.e. right and wrong, good and evil are relative; there are no real gods).
- ◆ Boosted the ability to make a strong argument seem weak and a weak one seem strong
- ◆ You don't need any knowledge of a subject to give satisfactory arguments.

Examples of Sophist Immoralism

- ◆ Thrasymachus: justice benefits the other, so why be just, might makes right (i.e. Mytilene in 428BC).
- ◆ By the 4th century BC, "sophist" refers to one who reasons falsely for the sake of gain (i.e. Rome)
- ◆ Hence our word "sophistry": Conscious use of fallacious arguments.

Socrates (470-399B.C.)



- ◆ Socrates did not write any texts.
- ◆ 3 contemporary writers...
 1. Plato (his student),
 2. Xenophon the historian (his friend)
 3. Aristophanes the playwright (an acquaintance)

Socrates (continued)

- ◆ Dutiful and lawful citizen and war veteran and is present in many Athenian public records of the time.
- ◆ Aristocratic sculptor, but devoted himself to philosophy, neglecting his business and family.
- ◆ Lived a very non-material and semi-vagabond lifestyle.

Socrates (continued)



- ◆ In teaching the youth, he gave rise to an intellectual aristocracy, who opposed popular Athenian politics, leading to general malcontent, popular hostility and personal hatred against him.

Socrates (continued)

- ◆ This crystallized and took juridical form when he was accused of corrupting youth, denying the national gods.



Socrates (continued)

- ◆ Finally he was tried and executed by the democratic state (hemlock).



Socrates' Reaction to Sophism

- ◆ Agreed with their humanism and also dismissed cosmology.
- ◆ Disagreed with their relativism of knowledge and morality, and their denial of traditional beliefs about right and justice.
- ◆ Disagreed with their use of relativism to strengthen one's personality in order to gain power over others (might makes right).

Reaction to Sophism (continued)

- ◆ Socrates tried to restore the values of a sacred and absolute morality, but based upon reason and logic.
- ◆ Socrates concentrated all his attention on the search for moral concepts.
- ◆ Sophism and democracy were dangerous.

Socrates' Doctrines

- ◆ Subject all human activities, concepts and institutions to objective reason.
- ◆ We cannot know true knowledge or morality without lifelong philosophical investigation.
- ◆ True knowledge and ideas, morals and concepts, are universal and absolute, objective not subjective.

Socratic Method

- ◆ We should define concepts to know what they are and how to be (holy, just and moral).
- ◆ He did not claim to know anything, but claimed to try to discover by questioning everything and determining what they were not.
- ◆ If there is an universal morality, truth & knowledge, then there is universal consciousness, then there is a universal god.

THE END
