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## 4. Athens: Socrates


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## 4. Athens: Socrates

### Abstract

Later Greek philosophers started with questions somewhat different from those of their predecessors. Instead of asking about the nature of the universe, they first concerned themselves with the nature of man, how he can know, and what he should do. These questions ultimately led them back to the earlier ones, but now with a different perspective. This change in emphasis came as the life of the independent city-state was drawing to its unhappy close and as it seemed that men were being cast adrift on uncharted seas. Three great figures dominate this period of ~ Greek philosophy by virtue of their attempts to find new moorings for the human life: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. By common consent these names are foremost in the history of philosophy. [excerpt]

### Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Greek history, Greek civilization, Greek philosophers, city-state

### Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Ancient Philosophy | Classics | Cultural History | History

### Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

### More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

### Authors

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#### 4. Socrates

Later Greek philosophers started with questions somewhat different from those of their predecessors. Instead of asking about the nature of the universe, they first concerned themselves with the nature of man, how he can know, and what he should do. These questions ultimately led them back to the earlier ones, but now with a different perspective. This change in emphasis came as the life of the independent city-state was drawing to its unhappy close and as it seemed that men were being cast adrift on uncharted seas. Three great figures dominate this period of Greek philosophy by virtue of their attempts to find new moorings ✓

for the human life: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. By common consent these names are foremost in the history of philosophy.]

It was Cicero who wrote that Socrates "brought down philosophy from heaven to earth." Our information about Socrates (469-399 B. C.), who left no body of writings, comes primarily through the works of his disciple, Plato. It is therefore impossible to know just exactly how much of Plato there is in Socrates and how much of Socrates in Plato. An Athenian citizen, he was an independent stonecutter who began life with a small legacy from his father. He was a citizen-soldier who participated in several campaigns, which took him out of Athens for what may have been the only occasions in his life. He was the good citizen who participated in the deliberations of the Assembly and took his turns holding public office.

Socrates grew to manhood in an Athens which was approaching trouble: the Peloponnesian War and the decline of its democracy. He was himself critical of a government whose sense of values was so inconsistent that it hired an expert to build a road while at the same time it equated the judgment of all citizens in matters involving public and private morals. He was aware of the speculations about the universe that were current in his day, but he gave up interest in them for something else. His mother had been a midwife. He resolved to follow her vocation and function as a midwife helping to deliver knowledge. He was convinced that the best possible help for the polis which he respected lay in the world of ideas.]

There was in later fifth century Athens a group of men known as the Sophists (the wise men). They had come from many places, attracted by the unchallenged cultural center of the day. These men had given up any hope of learning ultimate truth about the universe or man. To them all knowledge was relative. What seems to me is so to me, they would say, and what seems to you is so to you; man is the measure of all things -- things are as they appear to him to be.] The Sophists sharply criticized beliefs and traditions long accepted without question but which they argued were not proved. Why talk about virtue, they said, when no one can prove what virtue is? Why talk of justice, when in fact it is nothing more than the interest of the stronger?

*Man is the measure of all things.*

Most of what we know about the Sophists comes from the hands of their enemies. By profession they were teachers and for a time they were the most influential educators in Athens. It is reasonable to assume that there were sincere Sophists as well as those who gave the word "sophistry" its usual meaning today: deliberately fallacious reasoning which is sound only in appearance. Some of them did set out to prepare young men to make a success of their lives by clever use of a powerful tool, the human reason. Also, they expected to be paid for their services. This was perhaps another ominous sign in a society which regarded education as a function of the polis. In any event, it helped make them unpopular. The Sophists were opposed

most vehemently by those Athenians who wished to return to the beliefs and practices of an earlier day.

Socrates refused to accept either of these points of view without a thoroughgoing analysis of what they implied. This analysis took the form of asking questions of both sides, any place and any time, and of moving from one answer to another question in order to find out exactly what was meant when they said that man is the measure of all things or that piety is doing what the gods want. So skillful was Socrates in using what has come to be called the Socratic method and so devastating was his analysis that he made both sides appear groundless. Many onlookers thought that they were watching a good show and that perhaps Socrates was the critic whose main motivation in analyzing was to destroy. [Indeed, his self-styled role as the gadfly which stings people into action resembled that of the Sophists. But however negative it may have appeared, his intent was constructive. He proposed nothing less than a rational search for the meaning of life, one that would reject the sanctions of authority and of practicality. To him an unexamined life was not worth living: the proper study of mankind is man.]

Socrates was at one with the Sophists in believing that the popular mind was thoroughly confused about morality. He departed from them in believing that morality could be brought to rest on solid foundations. [Every man, he said, does what he believes at the time to be good. He was thoroughly convinced -- this was one of his most tenacious beliefs -- that no man does evil knowingly. By evil he meant fundamentally an error of judgment which was the result of ignorance. Each person must decide what is good before he acts. Since he is responsible to what Socrates called the Good to do the best that he can, he must also learn to know the best there is.]

To many a Sophists, goodness could lie in a technique, such as convincing public speaking, by which a lawyer might achieve fame and fortune. But this technique could be used to acquit a guilty man or to condemn an innocent one. For Socrates, knowledge of what is good will never be put to a wrong use, since no man does evil knowingly. [By the same token, virtue is knowledge, and this Socrates proclaimed. The emphasis on the freedom of the individual to search combined with his accountability to something higher than had hitherto been envisaged in Athens -- the Good -- marks the point at which ethics became a separate discipline within philosophy.]

Socrates believed that no man could offer a definition of the Good, since that would arrogate more knowledge than he was willing to admit that man possesses. It would also deny to others their own responsibility and would probably break off the discussion by which men could help each other in their search for the Good. Even if he could not define it, though, he insisted on believing in the reality of the Good. There was

*What is man  
that those act  
mindful of  
him?*

nothing of what we would call faith in the supernatural here, because Socrates refused to accept any other support than his unaided reason. He was satisfied that unless we accept the existence of the Good we are left in the grip of a skepticism in which one man's opinion is as good as another's and in which might makes right. He believed that human life found its highest expression and meaning in the love (eros) which reaches out and searches for the Good, rising from things, acts, and persons until it approaches comprehension of the ideal form of the Good, itself both good and beautiful.

Nor was the search for the Good a blind one, for man could know when he was near it through a memory by means of which he could recognize it. Socrates believed that before birth everyone has looked upon the Good as it really is, apart from the physical world. The story from Greek mythology had man drinking from the river Lethe and forgetting everything he had seen.

Later, when the memory reawakens, man comes to know by recognizing what he once knew and then forgot. Socrates said that he had an additional aid in this search. He called it his inner voice, or daemon. Whenever this voice spoke to him it was in negative terms only. It never told him what to do. As long as the voice was silent, Socrates felt assured that he was on the right track.

One of the oft-expressed Greek ideals was harmony. Upon close inspection, we find that Greek everyday life in its many aspects was rarely harmonious. Particularly during the later life of Socrates, the demands of the polis and the demands of his individuality often created a tension within a thinking man. After its defeat at the hands of Sparta, Athens was forced to replace the democracy which Socrates had often criticized with an oligarchy which itself was soon overthrown. In the midst of this political turmoil, few people could appreciate the necessity of examining one's life. Some thought that the influence of Socrates was at best subversive, especially after several of his followers were accused by the democrats of treason and cowardice. Charged with impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens who were his pupils, he was brought to trial. The sentence imposed was death by drinking hemlock. Although Socrates had implied that there was a higher reference for a man than the polis, and although in all probability he could have escaped from prison and gone into exile, he chose to accept the verdict with which he disagreed but whose legality he refused to call into question. Plato presented his version of the defense made by Socrates in the Apology, an excerpt from which follows. It should be obvious that the word "apology" is used here in a different sense from the way we are accustomed to using it.

...Men of Athens, this reputation of mine has come of a certain sort of wisdom which I possess. If you ask me what kind of wisdom, I reply, such wisdom as is attainable by man, for to that extent I am inclined to believe that I am wise; whereas the persons of whom I was speaking have a superhuman wisdom, which I may fail to describe,

*Lack of reverence for God.*

*A formal defense in writing*

because I have it not myself; and he who says that I have, speaks falsely, and is taking away my character. And here, O men of Athens, I must beg you not to interrupt me, even if I seem to say something extravagant. For the word which I will speak is not mine. I will refer you to a witness who is worthy of credit, and will tell you about my wisdom -- whether I have any, and of what sort -- and that witness shall be the God of Delphi. You must have known Chaerephon; he was early a friend of mine, and also a friend of yours, for he shared in the exile of the people, and returned with you. Well, Chaerephon, as you know, was very impetuous in all his doings, and he went to Delphi and boldly asked the oracle to tell him whether -- as I was saying, I must beg you not to interrupt -- he asked the oracle to tell him whether there was any one wiser than I was, and the Pythian prophetess answered, that there was no man wiser. Chaerephon is dead himself; but his brother, who is in court, will confirm the truth of this story.

Why do I mention this? Because I am going to explain to you why I have such an evil name. When I heard the answer, I said to myself, What can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of this riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god and cannot lie; that would be against his nature. After a long consideration, I at last thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, "Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest." Accordingly I went to one who had the reputation of wisdom, and observed him -- his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination -- and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and wiser still by himself; and I went and tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is, -- for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him. Then I sent to another who had still higher philosophical pretensions, and my conclusion was exactly the same. I made another enemy of him, and of many others beside him.

This investigation has led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind, and has given occasion also to many calumnies. And I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I

find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and in this oracle he means to say that the wisdom of men is little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name as an illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing. And so I go my way, obedient to the god, and make inquisition into the wisdom of any one, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise; and this occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god.....

And now, Athenians, I am not going to argue for my own sake, as you may think, but for yours, that you may not sin against the God, or lightly reject his boon by condemning me. For if you kill me you will not easily find another like me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by the God; and the state is like a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has given the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. And as you will not easily find another like me, I would advise you to spare me. I dare say that you may feel irritated at being suddenly awakened when you are caught napping; and you may think that if you were to strike me dead as Anytus advises, which you easily might, then you would sleep on for the remainder of your lives, unless God in his care of you gives you another gadfly. [And that I am given to you by God is proved by this: that if I had been like other men, I should not have neglected all my own concerns, or patiently seen the neglect of them during all these years, and have been doing yours, coming to you individually, like a father or elder brother, exhorting you to regard virtue; this, I say, would not be like human nature. And had I gained anything, or if my exhortations had been paid, there would have been some sense in that: but now, as you will perceive, not even the impudence of my accusers dares to say that I have ever exacted or sought pay of any one; they have no witness of that. And I have a witness of the truth of what I say; my poverty is a sufficient witness.]

Some one may wonder why I go about in private, giving advice and busying myself with the concerns of others, but do not venture to come forward in public and advise the state. I will tell you the reason of this. You have often heard me speak of an oracle or sign which comes to me, and is the divinity which Meletus ridicules in the indictment. This sign I have had ever since I was a child. The sign is a voice which comes to me and always forbids me to do something which I am going to do, but never commands me to do anything, and this is what stands in the way of my being a politician. And rightly, as I think. For I am certain, O

*contradict  
himself  
in a manner*



men of Athens, that if I had engaged in politics, I should have perished long ago, and done no good either to you or to myself. And don't be offended at my telling you the truth: for the truth is, that no man who goes to war with you or any other multitude, honestly struggling against the commission of unrighteousness and wrong in the state, will save his life; he who will really fight for the right, if he would live even for a little while, must have a private station and not a public one.

Now do you really imagine that I could have survived all these years, if I had led a public life, supposing that like a good man I had always supported the right and had made justice, as I ought, the first thing? No indeed, men of Athens, neither I nor any other. But I have been always the same in all my actions, public as well as private, and never have I yielded any base compliance to those who are slanderously termed my disciples, or to any other. For the truth is that I have no regular disciples: but if any one likes to come and hear me while I am pursuing my mission, whether he be young or old, he may freely come. Nor do I converse with those who pay only, and not with those who do not pay; but any one, whether he be rich or poor, may ask and answer me and listen to my words; and whether he turns out to be a bad man or a good one, that cannot be justly laid to my charge, as I never taught him anything. And if any one says that he has ever learned or heard anything from me in private which all the world has not heard, I should like you to know that he is speaking an untruth.

But I shall be asked, Why do people delight in continually conversing with you? I have told you already, Athenians, the whole truth about this: they like to hear the cross-examination of the pretenders to wisdom; there is amusement in this. And this is a duty which the God has imposed upon me, as I am assured by oracles, visions, and in every sort of way in which the will of divine power was ever signified to any one. This is true, O Athenians; or, if not true, would be soon refuted. For if I am really corrupting the youth, and have corrupted some of them already, those of them who have grown up and have become sensible that I gave them bad advice in the days of their youth should come forward as accusers and take their revenge; and if they do not like to come themselves, some of their relatives, fathers, brothers, or other kinsmen, should say what evil their families suffered at my hands. Now is their time.... \*