

HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW?

GREEK PHILOSOPHY

“ SOCRATES AND
ARISTOPHANES

Wow, philosophy sounds fascinating. Old men sitting around arguing about the nature of truth and the meaning of life. They probably used words that no one today can understand and were so caught up in their thoughts that they didn't even notice the real world.

There's an element of accuracy in that. Most Greek philosophers were indeed men. Many of them were concerned with issues like the nature of truth and the meaning of life. And sometimes the right words to express their ideas didn't exist, so they made up new ones, or used already-existing words in new ways. This can sometimes make their ideas hard to understand until you learn what they intended their words to mean. But philosophy is actually something you use every day.

Imagine that it's the first day of school. The classroom looks great—you can see some interesting-looking projects on the wall and one of your best friends is sitting next to you. You didn't get the teacher you were hoping for, but your parents said this one was supposed to be really good. Then a late arrival comes rushing up between the desks and steps on the backpack that you forgot to slide under your seat. You hear a crunch and open your backpack, only to see your new calculator in three pieces. The new student apologizes. You say it doesn't really matter, that it was a cheap one, and that you have another one at home (which isn't true).

So how is this philosophy?

What is a friend? How is this person next to you a friend, and the person behind him just someone you know? Defining terms like “friendship” is part of philosophy.

What about the teacher? Why is this a good teacher? Do your friends agree that this teacher is good? Deciding what

PHILOSOPHICAL EDUCATION

Do you know someone who is called “doctor,” but who isn’t a physician? That person probably has an advanced university degree called a “Ph.D.,” which stands for Latin words that mean “doctor of philosophy.” The scholars who invented universities in the Middle Ages thought that philosophy was central to any kind of advanced learning. So anyone who claimed to be extremely well educated had to have a thorough knowledge of philosophy.

is a fact and what is an opinion is another part of philosophy. And when you decide that you can live with the fact that you’ll have this teacher all year, you’ve used another aspect of philosophy: deciding what is important in life.

And those projects hanging on the wall—to you, they look exciting because your teacher last year made you do nothing but worksheets and you never got to do group projects. But to someone who had a different teacher last year, where they hatched duck eggs and raised the ducklings, a project done on paper might look boring. So some things are relative: how they seem to you depends on your own past experience. This is another part of philosophy, answering questions such as: Are all judgements relative? For instance, is it possible that it’s sometimes OK to steal and sometimes it isn’t? Can you prove your position?

When you told the latecomer that it didn’t matter that she broke your calculator, you were lying. But you were lying to make her feel better. Does that make it OK? Deciding how to distinguish between right and wrong is a big part of philosophy.

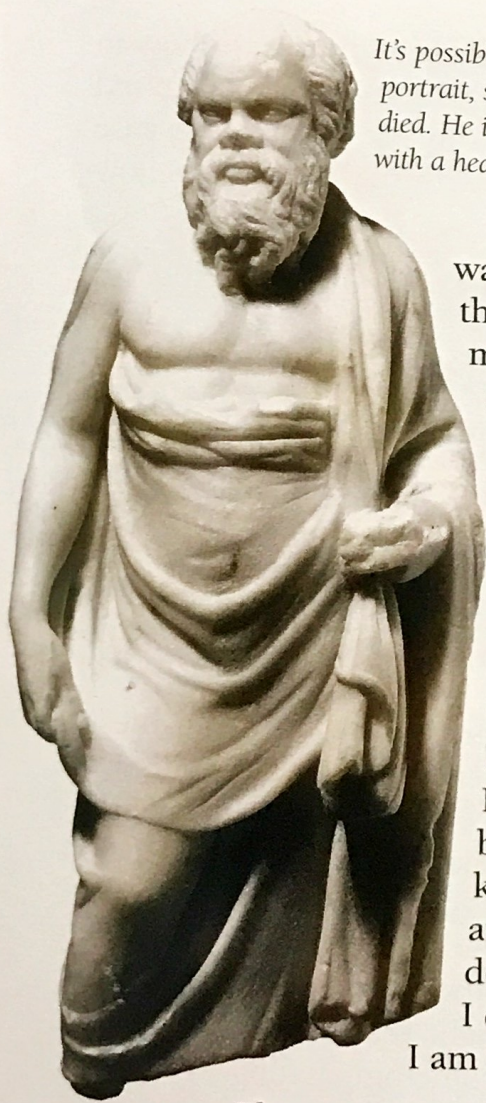
So philosophy is connected to daily life. And the Greek philosophers were most definitely involved in the real world. Actually, philosophy arose out of curiosity about nature. The first step in the development of philosophy is trying to figure out the world.

The Greeks thought of philosophy and science as two branches of the same study. Since early Greek scientists didn’t use experimentation as the definitive way to prove that something was true or false, the best way to convince someone else of your ideas was to show them how logical your thoughts were. Soon these arguments were used to explain not only the natural world, but human emotions and ideas.

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” The man who said this was the earliest of the true Greek philosophers. He was the Athenian Socrates, the son of a stonemason and a midwife. At various times he was a stonemason, a politician, and a soldier. He had taken part in some of the battles of the Peloponnesian War, but he spent most of his day in the marketplace talking to whoever else happened to be there. He

☞ Plato, *Apology of Socrates*,
399 BCE

It's possible that Socrates looked something like this portrait, since it was made about 399 BCE, the year he died. He is always shown as a chubby, unathletic man with a heavy beard, balding head, and snub nose.



was very good at showing people their ignorance. Once he went to a man who was supposed to be very intelligent. As he later recalled,

I tried to show him that even though he thought of himself as wise, he was not in fact wise at all. The result was that he hated me, as did many of those who were present and heard what I said. And so, as I was leaving, I said to myself: I am wiser than this man, because neither of us really knows anything really beautiful and good, but he thinks that he does, whereas I understand that I do not. And so in that respect I am better off than he is.

☞ Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 399 BCE

There aren't many things more hurtful than to be made to feel stupid. Socrates wasn't doing this for the fun of it (although he did sometimes admit he was aware of how bad he was making other people feel), but to prove a point: that you have to think about your life and what you do, and true wisdom is hard to attain.

Paradoxically, Socrates believed that every individual knew more than he thought he knew. It was the job of every teacher to draw out the hidden knowledge and also to show people that many times, what they assume is true is actually false. He used a question-and-answer format that is now called the "Socratic method."

The playwright Aristophanes made fun of Socrates in *The Clouds*. In this play, a man trying to weasel out of a debt

“Paradox” comes from *paradoxos*, which means “contrary to what most people believe.” Now it means something that is different from what you would logically expect.

decides to send his son to Socrates's school to learn how to argue. Socrates is presented as a silly figure who flies around in a school in the sky where other silly people talk nonsense all day long. He concerns himself with such matters as how far a flea can jump:

“ Aristophanes, *The Clouds*,
about 423 BCE

See, he melted some wax and grabbed hold of the flea
And he dipped in its two little feet:
When the wax had cooled off, then the shoes that
had formed
Were removed in the absence of heat,
And the size of the flea-slippers helped him to see
How the flea could perform in a meet.

People who felt stupid after conversing with Socrates must have been in stitches when they heard this mockery in the theater.

ek + kentron =
“out of” + “center”
Someone who is eccentric is
different or odd.

Most people thought of Socrates as just a harmless **eccentric**. But some people resented and mistrusted him. He irritated people by his questioning and he made them uncomfortable when his conversations made them question some things they had always believed in. Also, one of his pupils had been Alcibiades, an Athenian who had fought against his country. The memory of this traitor was very recent to the Athenians and some people thought that anyone who had been his teacher had to be doing something wrong.

So when Socrates was seventy years old, three citizens of Athens had him arrested on three charges: corrupting young people, not believing in the city's gods, and teaching about new gods. Athens had no laws protecting freedom of speech, the way many countries do today.

Socrates believed that Apollo, the god of wisdom, had commanded him to search for truth and to encourage his fellow-citizens to do the same. “Men of Athens,” he said at his trial,

“ Socrates, at his trial, 399 BCE

If you put me to death, you will not easily find
another who, to use a somewhat comical figure of
speech, attaches himself to the city like a gadfly. . . .
I think the god fastened me upon the city in some



This quiet death scene doesn't correspond with the description of the death of Socrates given by Plato. According to Plato, Socrates's friends surrounded his deathbed.

such capacity as this, and I go around arousing and reproaching and seeking to persuade you, constantly alighting upon you all day long wherever I find you. Such another is not likely to come to you, gentlemen; but if you take my advice, you will spare me.

The jury of 501 Athenian citizens condemned Socrates to death by drinking hemlock, a slow-acting poison.

Some of his friends tried to convince him to escape from jail. But he said that he had always supported the laws of Athens and he wasn't about to break one of them just because he happened to disagree with it. His friends came to sit with him and they felt as sad as if they were sons whose father was about to die. Even the jailer burst into tears when he brought Socrates the cup of poison.

Socrates drank it down, and as he lay dying, his last words were to remind his friend Crito that he had promised a rooster to the god Asclepius and to ask Crito to pay that debt for him.

The Athenians came to regret what they had done to Socrates. They put up a statue in his honor, but he was still dead. Socrates was right when he warned that putting him to death was a big mistake. Thousands of years later, people who are against democracy hold up his execution as an example of the dangers of that system.

**LET'S SEE, \$1,000
TIMES 501 EQUALS . . .**

Athenians liked large juries for two reasons: They provided a large cross-section of the citizenry and it would be so expensive to bribe them that nobody could afford it.