

Socrates and the Sophists

We have already completed the first part of the course. I refer to the natural philosophers and their decisive break with the mythological world picture. Now we are going to meet the three great classical philosophers, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Each in his own way, these philosophers influenced the whole of European civilization.

The natural philosophers are also called the pre-Socratics, because they lived before Socrates. Although Democritus died some years after Socrates, all his ideas belong to pre-Socratic natural philosophy. Socrates represents a new era, geographically as well as temporally. He was the first of the great philosophers to be born in Athens, and both he and his two successors lived and worked there. You may recall that Anaxagoras also lived in Athens for a while but was hounded out because he said the sun was a red-hot stone. (Socrates fared no better!)

From the time of Socrates, Athens was the center of Greek culture. It is also important to note the change of character in the philosophical project itself as it progresses from natural philosophy to Socrates. But before we meet Socrates, let us hear a little about the so-called Sophists, who dominated the Athenian scene at the time of Socrates.

Man at the Center

After about 450 b.c., Athens was the cultural center of the Greek world. From this time on, philosophy took a new direction.

The natural philosophers had been mainly concerned with the nature of the physical world. This gives them a central position in the history of science. In Athens, interest was now focused on the individual and the individual's place in society. Gradually a democracy evolved, with

In order for democracy to work, people had to be educated enough to take part in the democratic process. We have seen in our own time how a young democracy needs popular enlightenment. For the Athenians, it was first and foremost essential to master the art of rhetoric which means saying things in a convincing manner.

A group of itinerant teachers and philosophers from the Greek colonies flocked to Athens. They called themselves Sophists. The word "sophist" means a wise and informed person. In Athens, the Sophists made a living out of teaching the citizens for money.

The Sophists had one characteristic in common with the natural philosophers: they were critical of the traditional mythology. But at the same time the Sophists rejected what they regarded as fruitless philosophical speculation. Their opinion was that although answers to philosophical questions may exist, man cannot know the truth about the riddles of nature and of the universe. In philosophy a view like this is called skepticism.

But even if we cannot know the answers to all of nature's riddles, we know that people have to learn to

live together. The Sophists chose to concern themselves with man and his place in society.

“Man is the measure of all things,” said the Sophist Protagoras (c. 485-410 b.c.). By that he meant that the question of whether a thing is right or wrong, good or bad, must always be considered in relation to a person’s needs. On being asked whether he believed in the Greek gods, he answered, “The question is complex and life is short.” A person who is unable to say categorically whether or not the gods or God exists is called an agnostic.

The Sophists were, as a rule, men who had traveled widely and seen different forms of government. Both conventions and local laws in the city-states could vary widely. This led the Sophists to raise the question of what was natural and what was socially induced. By doing this, they paved the way for social criticism in the city-state of Athens.

They could for example point out that the use of an expression like “natural modesty” is not always defensible, for if it is “natural” to be modest, it must be something you are born with, something innate. But is it really innate or is it socially induced? To someone who has traveled the world, the answer should be simple: It is not “natural” – or innate – to be afraid to show yourself naked. Modesty – or the lack of it – is first and foremost a matter of social convention.

As you can imagine, the wandering Sophists created bitter wrangling in Athens by pointing out that there were no absolute norms for what was right or wrong.

Socrates, on the other hand, tried to show that some such norms are in fact absolute and universally valid.

Who Was Socrates?

Socrates (470-399 b.c.) is possibly the most enigmatic figure in the entire history of philosophy. He never wrote a single line. Yet he is one of the philosophers who has had the greatest influence on European thought, not least because of the dramatic manner of his death.

We know he was born in Athens, and that he spent most of his life in the city squares and marketplaces talking with the people he met there. “The trees in the countryside can teach me nothing,” he said. He could also stand lost in thought for hours on end.

Even during his lifetime he was considered somewhat enigmatic, and fairly soon after his death he was held to be the founder of any number of different philosophical schools of thought. The very fact that he was so enigmatic and ambiguous made it possible for widely differing schools of thought to claim him as their own.

We know for a certainty that he was extremely ugly. He was potbellied, and had bulging eyes and a snub nose. But inside he was said to be “perfectly delightful.” It was also said of him that “You can seek him in the present, you can seek him in the past, but you will never find his equal.” Nevertheless he was sentenced to death for his philosophical activities.

The life of Socrates is mainly known to us through the writings of Plato, who was one of his pupils and who became one of the greatest philosophers of all time. Plato wrote a number of Dialogues, or dramatized discussions in philosophy, in which he uses Socrates as his principal character and mouthpiece.

Since Plato is putting his own philosophy in Socrates' mouth, we cannot be sure that the words he speaks in the dialogues were ever actually uttered by him. So it is no easy matter to distinguish between the teachings of Socrates and the philosophy of Plato. Exactly the same problem applies to many other historical persons who left no written accounts. The classic example, of course, is Jesus. We cannot be certain that the "historical" Jesus actually spoke the words that Matthew or Luke ascribed to him. Similarly, what the "historical" Socrates actually said will always be shrouded in mystery.

But who Socrates "really" was is relatively unimportant. It is Plato's portrait of Socrates that has inspired thinkers in the Western world for nearly 2,500 years.

The Art of Discourse

The essential nature of Socrates' art lay in the fact that he did not appear to want to instruct people. On the contrary he gave the impression of one desiring to learn from those he spoke with. So instead of lecturing like a traditional schoolmaster, he discussed.

Obviously he would not have become a famous philosopher had he confined himself purely to listening

to others. Nor would he have been sentenced to death. But he just asked questions, especially to begin a conversation, as if he knew nothing. In the course of the discussion he would generally get his opponents to recognize the weakness of their arguments, and, forced into a corner, they would finally be obliged to realize what was right and what was wrong.

Socrates, whose mother was a midwife, used to say that his art was like the art of the midwife. She does not herself give birth to the child, but she is there to help during its delivery. Similarly, Socrates saw his task as helping people to "give birth" to the correct insight, since real understanding must come from within. It cannot be imparted by someone else. And only the understanding that comes from within can lead to true insight.

Let me put it more precisely: The ability to give birth is a natural characteristic. In the same way, everybody can grasp philosophical truths if they just use their innate reason. Using your innate reason means reaching down inside yourself and using what is there.

By playing ignorant, Socrates forced the people he met to use their common sense. Socrates could feign ignorance, or pretend to be dumber than he was. We call this Socratic irony. This enabled him to continually expose the weaknesses in people's thinking. He was not averse to doing this in the middle of the city square. If you met Socrates, you thus might end up being made a fool of publicly.

So it is not surprising that, as time went by, people found him increasingly exasperating, especially people who had status in the community. "Athens is like a

sluggish horse,” he is reputed to have said, “and I am the gadfly trying to sting it into life.”

A Divine Voice

It was not in order to torment his fellow beings that Socrates kept on stinging them. Something within him left him no choice. He always said that he had a “divine voice” inside him. Socrates protested, for example, against having any part in condemning people to death. He moreover refused to inform on his political enemies. This was eventually to cost him his life.

In the year 399 b.c. he was accused of, “introducing new gods and corrupting the youth,” as well as not believing in the accepted gods. With a slender majority, a jury of five hundred found him guilty.

He could very likely have appealed for leniency. At least he could have saved his life by agreeing to leave Athens. But had he done this he would not have been Socrates. He valued his conscience – and the truth – higher than life. He assured the jury that he had only acted in the best interests of the state. He was nevertheless condemned to drink hemlock. Shortly thereafter, he drank the poison in the presence of his friends, and died.

Why did Socrates have to die? People have been asking this question for 2,400 years. However, he was not the only person in history to have seen things through to the bitter end and suffered death for the sake of their convictions.

I have mentioned Jesus already, and in fact there are several striking parallels between them.

Both Jesus and Socrates were enigmatic personalities, also to their contemporaries. Neither of them wrote down their teachings, so we are forced to rely on the picture we have of them from their disciples. But we do know that they were both masters of the art of discourse. They both spoke with a characteristic self-assuredness that could fascinate as well as exasperate. And not least, they both believed that they spoke on behalf of something greater than themselves. They challenged the power of the community by criticizing all forms of injustice and corruption. And finally their activities cost them their lives.

The trials of Jesus and Socrates also exhibit clear parallels.

They could certainly both have saved themselves by appealing for mercy, but they both felt they had a mission that would have been betrayed unless they kept faith to the bitter end. And by meeting their death so bravely they commanded an enormous following, also after they had died.

I do not mean to suggest that Jesus and Socrates were alike. I am merely drawing attention to the fact that they both had a message that was inseparably linked to their personal courage.

A Joker in Athens

Socrates lived at the same time as the Sophists. Like them, he was more concerned with man and his place in society than with the forces of nature. As a Roman philosopher, Cicero, said of him a few hundred years later, Socrates “called philosophy down from the

sky and established her in the towns and introduced her into homes and forced her to investigate life, ethics, good and evil.”

But Socrates differed from the Sophists in one significant way. He did not consider himself to be a “sophist” – that is, a learned or wise person. Unlike the Sophists, he did not teach for money. No, Socrates called himself a philosopher in the true sense of the word. A “philosopher” really means “one who loves wisdom.”

It is central to fully understand the difference between a sophist and a philosopher. The Sophists took money for their more or less hairsplitting expoundings, and sophists of this kind have come and gone from time immemorial. I am referring to all the schoolmasters and self-opinionated know-it-alls who are satisfied with what little they know, or who boast of knowing a whole lot about subjects they haven’t the faintest notion of. You have probably come across a few of these sophists in your young life. A philosopher knows that in reality he knows very little. That is why he constantly strives to achieve true insight. Socrates was one of these rare people. He knew that he knew nothing about life and about the world. And now comes the important part: it troubled him that he knew so little.

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. “Wisest is she who knows she does not know,” I said previously. Socrates himself said, “One thing only I know, and that is that I know nothing.”

Remember this statement, because it is an admission that is rare, even among philosophers. Moreover, it can be so dangerous to say it in public that it can cost you your life. The most subversive people are those who ask questions. Giving answers is not nearly as threatening. Any one question can be more explosive than a thousand answers.

You remember the story of the emperor’s new clothes? The emperor was actually stark naked but none of his subjects dared say so. Suddenly a child burst out, “But he’s got nothing on!” That was a courageous child. Like Socrates, who dared tell people how little we humans know.

To be precise: Mankind is faced with a number of difficult questions that we have no satisfactory answers to. So now two possibilities present themselves: We can either fool ourselves and the rest of the world by pretending that we know all there is to know, or we can shut our eyes to the central issues once and for all and abandon all progress. In this sense, humanity is divided. People are, generally speaking, either dead certain or totally indifferent.

It is like dividing a deck of cards into two piles. You lay the black cards in one pile and the red in the other. But from time to time a joker turns up that is neither heart nor club, neither diamond nor spade. Socrates was this joker in Athens. He was neither certain nor indifferent. All he knew was that he knew nothing – and it troubled him. So he became a philosopher – someone who does not give up but tirelessly pursues his quest for truth.

An Athenian is said to have asked the oracle at Delphi who the wisest man in Athens was. The oracle answered that Socrates of all mortals was the wisest. When Socrates heard this he was astounded, to put it mildly. He went straight to the person in the city whom he, and everyone else, thought was excessively wise. But when it turned out that this person was unable to give Socrates satisfactory answers to his questions, Socrates realized that the oracle had been right. Socrates felt that it was necessary to establish a solid foundation for our knowledge. He believed that this foundation lay in man's reason. With his unshakable faith in human reason he was decidedly a rationalist.

The Right Insight Leads to the Right Action

As I have mentioned earlier, Socrates claimed that he was guided by a divine inner voice, and that this "conscience" told him what was right. "He who knows what good is will do good," he said.

By this he meant that the right insight leads to the right action. And only he who does right can be a "virtuous man." When we do wrong it is because we don't know any better. That is why it is so important to go on learning. Socrates was concerned with finding clear and universally valid definitions of right and wrong. Unlike the Sophists, he believed that the ability to distinguish between right and wrong lies in people's reason and not in society.

You may perhaps think this last part is a bit too obscure. Let me put it like this: Socrates thought that no one could possibly be happy if they acted against their

better judgment. And he who knows how to achieve happiness will do so. Therefore, he who knows what is right will do right. Because why would anybody choose to be unhappy?

What do you think? Can you live a happy life if you continually do things you know deep down are wrong? There are lots of people who lie and cheat and speak ill of others. Are they aware that these things are not right-or fair, if you prefer? Do you think these people are happy?

Socrates didn't.