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# Philosophy of Ancient Athens

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## PHILOSOPHY IN ANCIENT ATHENS

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“Know Thyself! The unexamined Life is not worth Living.”

Whether you agree or not with Socrates’ claim that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” you cannot refute that Socrates, this ancient Athenian who lived four centuries before Christ, made a huge impact on the fields of philosophy and of education. Known primarily for his teaching method, Socrates was accused of riling up the youth of his time. When someone challenges others to think differently than the traditional ways that have been passed down, it sometimes upsets the apple cart, the power structure, the political system. And that’s exactly what Socrates did.

Sounds a bit like another man who is also known as a great philosopher, doesn’t it? Both Socrates and Jesus were accused of being trouble makers. Both were known for using strategic questioning strategies to challenge the thinking of their disciples. And both were unjustly condemned to death—Jesus by the cross and Socrates by taking hemlock. Neither of them wrote any books, so we know about them primarily from the writings of their students. Now, before we discuss Socrates’ influence on his students and how that influence has trickled down through the millennia, let’s take a closer look at the philosophical milieu that existed in ancient Athens.

### **Philosophical Milieu of Ancient Athens**

If you read chapter 17 in the book of Acts, you’ll get a feel for the philosophical tone in ancient Athens. Granted, Paul was there a few hundred years after Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, but many of the schools of thought were the same.

Paul began his day in the synagogue discussing theology with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks, but he left the synagogue to go to the marketplace, called the *agora*. The word *agora* is the merger of two Greek words that mean “I shop” and “I speak in public.” Athenians didn’t just go to the marketplace to buy fish and bread; they went there to hear what the latest ideas were—to find out what merchants were learning from other parts of the world.

### **Stoics**

Built around the agora (the marketplace) were porches with beautiful columns, sculptures, and paintings. So they called these public spaces *stoas*, or painted porches. On the stoas, politicians, philosophers, and poets gathered to share their ideas. Some of the more frequent “street preachers,” you might call them, became known as *Stoics* because they were some of the most outspoken and dogmatic speakers on the *stoas*. What did Stoics believe? In a nutshell, they believed in the supernatural—that the gods were real and that these gods determined the human world. They believed people should seek truth but that there was something blocking them from reaching that truth. Similar to the Buddhist belief regarding Nirvana, Stoics taught that truth could not fully be reached until passion and desire were removed. Passion, desire, and emotions distracted learners and distorted truth, so true learning must minimize them. Thus, we get the term *stoic expression*.

### **Epicureans**

Acts 17 tells us that when Paul left the synagogue and went to the marketplace that day, he reasoned “with those who happened to be there.” That included the Stoics, but it also included a group of philosophers called Epicureans, named after their founder, Epicurus. Unlike the Stoics, Epicureans did not believe in the supernatural. They were materialists, hedonists, who did agree with Stoics on one particular point—that you could pursue truth and know it. A

major difference, though, is that it wasn't passion and desire that kept learners from truth; it was pain, sorrow, and suffering. Epicureans would call the pursuit of truth the "pursuit of happiness," which is—as you guessed it—exactly where Thomas Jefferson got the third unalienable right in the Declaration of Independence.

### **Skeptics and Sophists**

**Skeptics.** Acts 17 mentions specifically that Stoics and Epicureans began to debate with Paul, but—more than likely—there were other philosophical groups at the marketplace that day. It would have been common for Skeptics to be present on the stoa. The Skeptics were followers of Pyrrho, whose beliefs were in reaction to the radically polar views of the Stoics and Epicureans. They believed that truth could not be known and that it was futile to make any truth claims. Imagine the Skeptics in the marketplace as they listened to the Stoics and Epicureans argue. The response of the Skeptics can be found in some of their most common expressions:

- "Every saying has its corresponding opposite."
- "Not more one thing than another."
- "We determine nothing."

And determining nothing was truly what they were all about. They taught that, since truth cannot be known, we need to teach people to suspend judgment, suspend belief, and refrain from making any truth claims.

**Sophists.** Now, in addition to the Stoics, Epicureans, and Skeptics, there was at least one more group that Paul most likely confronted in the marketplace—the Sophists. Sophists were the first paid teachers in recorded history. To understand the Sophists, it's important to know who their students were, what their curriculum focused on, and why they taught their students.

***Who were their students?*** Sophists tutored wealthy male citizens of Athens.

**What was their curriculum?** Relativism and rhetoric. By relativism, Sophists meant that truth depended on the circumstances. Sophists believed skills were more important than content because content (or truth) can change, but skills are valuable in any context. But, of all skills, why did they place so much emphasis on rhetoric? That gets to the motivation, or the “why,” of their teaching.

**Why?** Remember, Athens was the birthplace of democracy, but it was not a representative democracy in which representatives voted for legislation on behalf of their constituents. It was a direct democracy whereby every adult male qualifying as a citizen could vote on legislation. Because of this, skills of persuasion were paramount. He who could persuade others had a great amount of power and could also protect his wealth. Since there was no income tax system as we have today, many laws indicated who would be responsible to pay for construction of a bridge or to pay expenses for a festival to the gods.

The battle was between old wealth and new wealth and who truly had the most wealth. Sophists really didn't care who actually had more wealth; their job was just to ensure that their clients were able to persuade voters that the other guy should pay, not their client. Sounds somewhat like a defense attorney, right? Now, forgive me if you have a defense attorney as a friend or family member, but that is the reputation Sophists had among their contemporaries and among historians. The negative connotations applied to words such as *sophistry* and *sophomoric* reveal the type of reputation the Sophists had.

Protagoras was credited as originating the role of the Sophist in Athenian society. The word *protagonist* is derived from Protagoras's name. A protagonist is an actor, a lead character. For a plot to develop, however, every protagonist needs an antagonist, and Protagoras's antagonist was his teacher—Socrates. How fitting! Socrates was certainly antagonistic to

Protagoras's ideas that "Man is the measure of all things" and that there is no absolute truth. The Socratic Method itself may even be described as somewhat antagonistic with its questioning, probing, and requiring students to defend their rationale.

### **Plato's Idealism**

Under the tutelage of Socrates, Protagoras had a fellow pupil who is far more renowned than he—Plato. It is through Plato's writings that we learn about their mentor Socrates, and it is also through Plato's writings that the world was introduced to the philosophy of idealism. To understand the central principle of idealism, think of what it means to be in a strictly platonic relationship. Such a relationship values the emotional and spiritual aspects of friendship rather than the physical.

Through Plato's Allegory of the Cave, he illustrated how ultimate reality is not in the shadows of this physical world but is outside the cave. Real meaning is not in the cave at all, where people are captives chained so that they can only see shadows cast on the back of the cave wall. The captives may come to believe the shadows are all there is, but—Plato argues—if the captives could be released and enter the world outside the cave, they would experience the ideas and ideals behind the shadows. For example, justice and freedom are abstract ideals that should be taught and for which all society should strive. How common it is, though, to hear someone declare, "Life's not fair!" And as Jean Jacques Rousseau observed, "Man is born free but is everywhere in chains." Do these observations about justice and freedom make those ideals not real? Because they may be attained only to a limited degree in this world, does that make them irrelevant? Not at all, claimed Plato! Abstract ideals of justice, freedom, beauty, goodness, and virtue are the most important concepts to teach, according to Plato.

### **Aristotle's Realism**

It's been said that all philosophy is a footnote to Plato. The point of that statement is that various philosophies either agree or disagree with Plato to some extent. The disagreement started with his own student—Aristotle. Raphael's Renaissance fresco entitled *School of Athens* illustrated the difference between Plato and Aristotle by picturing Plato pointing upward while holding a book down by his side. This symbolized Plato's idea that ultimate truth is out there beyond the cave for us to aspire to and that observations of this physical world, while they certainly exist and hold some practical meaning, are shadows in comparison to the ideals, virtues, and abstract concepts that make us distinctly human. In contrast, Aristotle is pictured holding a book out in one hand while gesturing to it with the other. Aristotle's eyes are looking directly into his teacher Plato's as if to indicate some sort of faceoff between the two. While they both agreed that there were universal absolute truths, Aristotle held that ultimate reality is found in natural law—observations about the physical world and how it worked. Therefore, Aristotle was considered the father of natural realism.

### **Conclusion**

With this brief snapshot of philosophy in ancient Athens, consider how educational arguments have played out in more recent times. Why do some embrace common core and others reject it? Why do some parents enroll their children in a private classical school or prefer a magnet or charter school that emphasizes technology? Why do some teachers, such as Rafe Esquith, spend hours memorizing and performing Shakespearean plays with elementary students while others focus on literature perceived as more relevant to contemporary student experiences? It may be—as in the difference between Plato and Aristotle or between the Stoics and the Epicureans—that they see meaning, purpose, and ultimate reality in different ways.

Let's wrap up by going back to Acts 17. Paul started his day in the synagogue, and then stepped out into the marketplace where he interacted with Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics, and Sophists. People in the marketplace thought Paul's message was so different from all the other philosophies that they took him to the meeting of the Areopagus. It was there, on Mar's Hill, the Acropolis, where Paul gave his famous sermon that transformed lives of men and women that day by introducing them to the Way, the Truth, and the Life in the person of Jesus Christ.

I challenge you today to consider your own marketplace. If you engaged culture the way Paul did, how could you impact it?

*Samuel J. Smith*