

The Golden Age of Philosophy

Early Greek philosophy owed much to the work of the Pre-Socratic thinkers of the 6th century B.C. However, by the 5th century, another group of philosophers was developing in the Greek city-state of Athens. This school of thinkers, known as the Sophists, was founded around 450 B.C.

The Sophists were, perhaps, the first paid professional teachers. They took their name from the Greek word *sophia* meaning "wisdom." The word *sophist* meant "one who is wise." This group of philosophers did not deliver packaged lectures as more modern teachers do today. They wanted students to think for themselves.

To accomplish this, the Sophists used a method of teaching which included asking their students a series of questions, but without providing clear answers. Students were encouraged to respond, but their answers would lead to another question from the teacher-philosopher. This process was designed to aid students in developing the ability to reason, to think clearly and critically, and to engage in logical argumentation.

While earlier Greek philosophers were interested in questions concerning the universe and its material makeup, the Sophists were not. Instead, they emphasized how humans should view their world. They sought to develop a standard against which they could judge everything in the world.

This led one Sophist teacher, Protagoras (who taught in Athens from 445 to 420 B.C.), to develop a concept of evaluation which could be summed up in one sentence: *Man is the measure of all things*. The Sophists taught that each individual looked at the world differently. Therefore, they taught that there was no such thing as absolute or universal truth, beauty, or justice. To the Sophists, all things were relative, meaning they could be interpreted differently by different people.

Some philosophers in Athens did not agree with this idea of the Sophists. One such philosopher was Socrates (469–399 B.C.). He was one of the most famous of all Greek thinkers.

Socrates believed that absolute truth, beauty, and justice did exist. He called them eternal and never changing. To him, it did not matter what anyone

thought about something. Things in the world had their own independent existences. A rose may be beautiful whether it is ever judged by a human to have beauty.

For Socrates, then, absolute truth did exist. His philosophy about absolutes caused him to question the role of the gods in his life. He chose to put his faith in *eternal truth* rather than the Greek gods. This made him unpopular with certain Greek leaders. They accused Socrates of corrupting Athenian youths, and they put him on trial for this and blasphemy, or speaking against the gods. He was found guilty and condemned to die by drinking poison in 399 B.C.

One of Socrates' students also became a famous Greek philosopher. Plato (c. 427–347 B.C.) was an Athenian and a follower of Socrates. He founded a school called the Academy.

Plato wrote many works during his career. He spoke against the Sophists just as Socrates had. Plato also believed in the idea of absolute truth. Since things in the world constantly change and are sometimes corrupted, including law, morals, and ethics, he explained that the perfect forms of all these existed outside of the world. He developed the concept of the House of Idea as proof.

In Plato's House of Idea, one could find the perfect everything: a chair, a flower, a physical body, even abstracts such as truth, beauty, and law. Here, all things remain the same and never change. It is only when the physical world brings about change or when things become corrupted on earth that they appear to change.

Review and Write

1. What do you see as the major difference in the philosophies of the Sophists and men such as Socrates and Plato?
2. Who were the Sophists and how did they instruct others?

Greek Philosophy

Between the 6th century and the 4th century B.C., Greeks began to wonder about the nature of the world, the universe, and the meaning of life. Their studies developed out of a love of wisdom. They coined a word to describe such studies—*philosophy* (a combination of two Greek words: *philo*, meaning “love,” and *sophia*, meaning “wisdom”).

The philosophers of the 6th century B.C. were called the Pre-Socratics (so KRAT icks) because they lived before the greatest of Greek philosophers, Socrates. Unlike most modern philosophers (and more like today's scientists), the Pre-Socratics were concerned with the scientific study of nature.

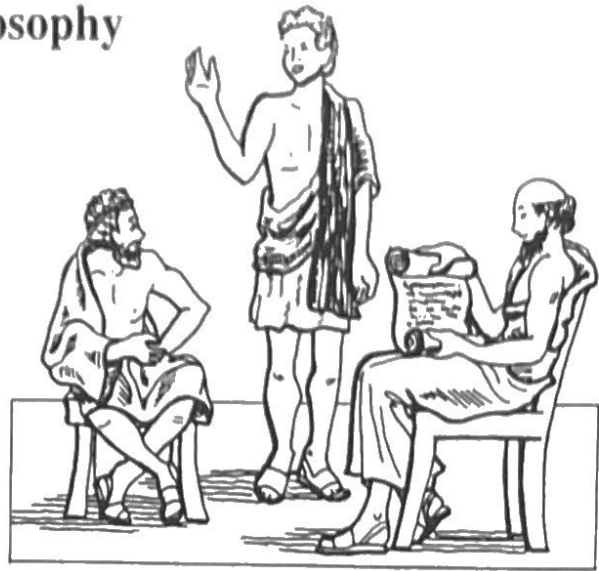
While scientists from other parts of the ancient world described astronomy in supernatural terms, the Pre-Socratics eliminated the role of the spirit world in explaining why the stars and the planets move in the night sky.

Such studies allowed Pre-Socratic philosopher-scientists, such as Thales, (thay LEEZ, c. 625–545 B.C.) to predict a solar eclipse in 585 B.C.

Most important to these philosopher-scientists was the question of how all the parts of nature fit together. They believed that everything was made of some principal, underlying substance. Thales, for example, believed that everything contained water. Others felt the fundamental substance of the universe was air or fire. Still others suspected something smaller and more basic than that.

One philosopher who developed a theory on this subject was Anaxagoras (an ak SAG or as, c. 500–428 B.C.). He taught in Athens, although he was from Miletus. He believed that the physical world—everything from rocks to planets to humans—was made of combinations of the same material.

Anaxagoras described this primary substance as tiny “seeds” which can come together in an infinite number of ways to create different results. These seeds were so small they could not be observed by the naked eye. As the combination of seeds changed, the appearance of a thing also changed, such as when a man grew old and developed wrinkles, white hair, and poor eyesight. This theory allowed all things to be made of the same substance, but to appear different with age.



Another question which plagued the Pre-Socratics was the issue of change. Was everything in the world in a state of flux (as the philosopher Heraclitus thought), or was there, in fact, an underlying constancy? This may seem to us an unimportant study, yet it profoundly influenced Greek thinking.

The Greek idea that things in the world contain the same elements regardless of appearance and age gave the Greeks the idea that some aspects of life never change. They applied this concept to their values, as well as to their physical world.

When the Greeks asked themselves about the nature of truth, beauty, or justice, they concluded that such values could exist without ever changing. They came to believe that values remain constant, never changing, and universal. Truth could always remain truth, and justice could be the same for everyone.

Review and Write

1. Anaxagoras used the term “seeds” to describe the basic element of all matter. What term is used today in the scientific world to refer to the basic unit of matter? Do you think the questions these philosophers were asking are important? Why?
2. How did the Pre-Socratic philosophers explain the stars and planets differently from other ancient cultures?