

Lecture 12: History of Greek Philosophy

Greek Historical Periods

Greek philosophy developed over several distinct historical periods. The Dark Era (1100–800 BCE) marked the decline of Mycenaean civilization and a loss of literacy and cultural cohesion. The Archaic Era (800–480 BCE) witnessed the re-emergence of trade, writing, and the early city-states, setting the stage for philosophical thought. In the Classical Era (510–333 BCE), Athens became the intellectual hub of the Greek world, birthing its most iconic thinkers. Finally, the Hellenistic Era (323–146 BCE) saw Greek culture spread across the Mediterranean and Near East following Alexander the Great's conquests, leading to new philosophical schools like Stoicism and Epicureanism.

Pre-Socratic Philosophy

Before Socrates, philosophers attempted to explain the cosmos through reason and observation rather than myth and religion. This marked the beginning of **natural philosophy**. The earliest of these thinkers, **Thales of Miletus**, proposed that water was the fundamental substance of the universe. His followers, **Anaximander** and **Anaximenes**, introduced alternative concepts: the “infinite” (or *apeiron*) and air, respectively. These views represent **Material Monism**—the belief that all things originate from one basic substance or principle.

Their shift from mythology to naturalism was revolutionary. Thales famously said, “Everything is full of gods,” yet he tried to explain the world in material terms. Anaximander introduced the concept of the boundless as the origin of all, while Anaximenes argued that air was the primal element. These thinkers rejected fatalistic and mythological explanations, favoring logical inquiry.

Pythagoras, another significant pre-Socratic thinker, believed in the central role of numbers in understanding reality. He is often associated with mysticism and mathematics and was known for strange tales, including the legend that he had a “golden thigh.”

Heraclitus contributed the idea of constant change and conflict, summed up in his saying: “You cannot step into the same river twice.” He believed in a universe governed by logos (rational principle), and his philosophy emphasized flux and transformation.

Together, these early philosophers represent a move away from divine fate and myth toward logical analysis and observation, a crucial foundation for Western philosophy and science.

Classical Philosophy

The Classical Era brought forth the central figures of ancient Greek philosophy: **Socrates**, **Plato**, and **Aristotle**. These thinkers profoundly shaped the Western intellectual tradition.

- **Socrates (470–399 BCE)** is regarded as the “father of philosophy.”

- **Plato (c. 428–347 BCE)**, his student, systematized and preserved his teachings.
- **Aristotle (384–322 BCE)**, Plato’s student, advanced logic, ethics, biology, and politics.

These philosophers developed rigorous systems of inquiry that continue to influence disciplines from science to ethics. Later schools like the Epicureans, who sought personal happiness through moderation, and the Stoics, who promoted virtue and rationality, drew from the foundation these thinkers established.

Socrates – The Father of Philosophy

Socrates is considered the father of Western philosophy for his method of inquiry and his ethical focus. He likened Athens to a sluggish horse that needed to be stirred into life, calling himself the “gadfly” that stung it awake. His goal was not to lecture but to provoke self-reflection and critical thought.

Socrates was influenced by earlier philosophers like Anaxagoras, who introduced rational explanations for natural phenomena. He also drew from the wisdom of women: his mother, a midwife (who inspired his metaphor of philosophy as assisting birth of ideas), a priestess, and a rhetorician who deepened his understanding of love, compassion, and persuasive communication.

Although Socrates himself never wrote any texts, his philosophy is preserved through the works of Plato and Xenophon, as well as comedic portrayals by the playwright Aristophanes, who mocked Socrates in *The Clouds*. These sources present a portrait of a man with deep intellect, unshakable principles, and a radical approach to truth-seeking.

The Life of Socrates

Socrates was born around 469 BCE in Athens. His father was a sculptor, and his mother was a midwife, roles that symbolized both artistry and nurturing. As a young man, Socrates studied music, gymnastics, and grammar. He initially followed his father’s trade and was regarded as a skilled sculptor.

He later served with bravery in the Athenian military. However, he gained fame for engaging people in philosophical dialogues in the agora (marketplace), where he questioned the values, beliefs, and knowledge of Athenian citizens. His goal was not to provide answers but to awaken people to the contradictions in their thinking.

Socrates believed that learning should come through self-discovery and reasoning rather than passive acceptance. He urged the youth of Athens to question traditional beliefs and to pursue personal understanding of virtue, justice, and truth.

The Death of Socrates

In 399 BCE, Socrates was indicted on charges of impiety (failing to honor Athenian gods) and corrupting the youth. At his trial, he defended his actions passionately, stating that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” His refusal to abandon his philosophical mission angered many Athenians.

Rather than fleeing, Socrates accepted his death sentence with grace. He drank a cup of hemlock, a fatal poison, and as described by his friends, he walked calmly until his legs went numb, then lay down and died without fear, surrounded by those who loved him. His noble death became as impactful as his life, leaving a legacy of courage and intellectual honesty.

Socrates’ Work and Legacy

Socrates didn’t leave behind any writings, so we rely on the accounts of Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes to understand his life and philosophy. In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates appears as the main character, engaging in thought-provoking debates. Xenophon provides more historical narratives of Socrates' life. Aristophanes offers a critical but culturally significant view.

These sources reveal Socrates as a thinker devoted to truth, self-awareness, and moral virtue. His teachings profoundly influenced Plato’s philosophy, especially in works like the Allegory of the Cave, which explores enlightenment and the process of gaining knowledge.

Socratic Philosophy

Central to Socratic thought is the idea that doubt is the origin of truth. Socrates emphasized introspection, urging people to “Know thyself”—to understand one’s purpose and moral compass. He believed that virtue is a kind of knowledge, and that immoral behavior comes from ignorance, not evil intent.

Socrates also believed in the immortality of the soul and claimed to receive divine insight or a spiritual “voice” that guided his actions. His most famous quote, “I know one thing: that I know nothing,” captures the humility and curiosity at the core of his philosophy.

The Socratic Method (Dialectic)

The Socratic Method, or dialectic, involves asking a series of questions to stimulate critical thinking and draw out underlying beliefs. Socrates described himself as a “midwife,” helping others deliver their own ideas through guided questioning. The term dialectic comes from the Greek words *di* (two) and *lactic* (words), signifying a dialogue between two viewpoints.

In a typical Socratic dialogue, Socrates challenges assumptions, proposes counterarguments, and leads participants to either refine or abandon their original beliefs. This method laid the foundation for logic, debate, and the scientific method.

Interesting Facts About Socrates

Socrates was different from most teachers of his time, he didn't charge for his lessons and lived modestly. He married Xanthippe and had three sons. Despite being given the opportunity to escape prison, he chose to remain in Athens and accept his punishment, valuing the rule of law over self-preservation.

At his trial, Socrates boldly suggested that instead of a death sentence, he should be rewarded by the city for encouraging moral and intellectual growth. His unwavering commitment to his ideals has made him a timeless symbol of intellectual integrity and personal virtue.