

What this lecture is about:

In this lecture you will learn a bit about the social and philosophical history of ancient Greece, especially that period from 8th to 4th century BCE. These are the centuries ranging before and after what is called the "Golden Age of Athens," through the life and death of Socrates. Having this background will give you some understanding of the political and social setting in which the dialogues take place, as well as offering you a first glimpse of the broader philosophical themes we will explore throughout the semester.

Outline:

1. General Comments on the Euthyphro
2. Dates for Socrates and Plato in comparison with other historical figures
3. Social and political structure of Greece from 8th to 4th centuries BCE
4. What is Philosophy?

#### 1. General Comments on the Euthyphro

1.1 How to pronounce the name of the dialogue. The name of the dialogue is pronounced: YOU-the-fro. "You" as in "You, not me." The "t-h-y" is usually pronounced as a blend: it is somewhere between the long and short 'e' sound we make when we say either "The end" ("thee end) or "The end" (tuh end). And "fro" as in "Afro." When you put it together, it almost sounds as if you were saying to Michael Jordan or Shaquille O'Neal: "You the man!" Instead, we'll be saying: "You the Fro!" The first two letters ('eu') form a diphthong in Greek. It's a root (or prefix) meaning "good" or "well". It survives in some of our words today, e.g., eulogy (eu+logos ="good+account" or "good+word") or euthanasia eu+thanatos="good+death"). Thanatos was the Greek god of death. Can you think of any other words we use that begin with "eu"?

#### 1.2 Reading Plato's dialogues

Reading Plato's dialogues is an adventure! Sometimes it is easy reading, sometimes it is difficult. One thing that makes it difficult is the fact that these are plays that we're reading. Often it is easy to "lose track" of what the characters are talking about. This especially true with the discussions Socrates has with his interlocutors. Usually, the conversations go round and round in circles. Indeed, if the reading makes you feel a bit "sea-sick," you now have a pretty good idea about how the characters felt!

The dialogues follow a "Q&A"-question and answer format. On "Who wants to be a millionaire", when the contestant is asked "Is that your final answer?" he or she stands by the answer and instantly finds out whether the answer was correct or not. Not so with Socrates. There never seems to be "a final answer," at least not from Socrates' perspective. Even the most reasonable answers are dissected, torn apart, and re-examined. Unlike Regis, Socrates gives his interlocutors second, third, fourth, and fifth chances -- as many as it takes -- to give yet another "final answer." Do they ever arrive at an acceptable "final answer"? We'll find out as the semester goes along.

Every Platonic dialogue you're assigned bears re-reading over and over. This is not the sort of reading you can zip through 15 minutes before class. You'll need to schedule your time so that you can read the dialogues carefully two times-at the very least. In all honesty, I suggest that you read them about four (4) times. I also strongly suggest that you use the [study questions](#). They will help pinpoint the issues being discussed in the dialogue.

Next, we'll look at a timeline.

## 2. Dates for Socrates and Plato in comparison with other historical figures

### 2.1 Timeline

Most dates are BCE. "BCE" stands for "before the Common Era". This is the designation scholars use now instead of "BC". The old "AD" is CE, or Common Era. The timeframe is the same, however. Anything BCE is still in the time period "before Christ".

Moses 14-13th c. BCE

David c. 1000-962

Thales 628-551

Pythagoras 610-545

Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha 563-483

Confucius 551-479

Lao-tzu 6th c.

Anaxagoras 500-428

Gorgias 483-376

Socrates 470-399

Democritus 460-370

Hippocrates 460-377

Plato 428-347

Next, take a trip to Greece in the 8th-4th centuries BCE

### 3. Social and political structure of Greece from 8th to 4th centuries BCE

The period in ancient Greece from the 8th to the 4th century BCE was a period marked by intellectual and cultural advances as well as political upheaval, war, and plague. This four hundred year period-just a little more than the period of our own history from colonial times to today-spans the time before, during, and after the Athenian "Golden Age", a time when Athens reached the height of its prowess, prestige, and power, to the its humiliating defeat and near collapse.

#### 3.1 Geo-political structure

Ancient Greece was divided along geo-political lines. Prior to the 8th-7th centuries BCE, these areas were governed by kings. In the 8th-7th centuries there developed the city-state or polis. Some city-states were governed by democratically elected officials. Instead of a king, there were now typically three elected head officials (archons), one each for religious, judicial, and civil matters. Other city-states, however, were governed by tyrants. The tyrants typically came from the elite, wealthy families, and although they frequently seized power, they often ruled by the continued assent of the people. Sometimes this form of autocratic rule, was an interim stage in the transition from monarchy to democracy.

Athens was the largest of the city-states. It had a population of around 20, 000 voting citizens and 350, 000 "others"-slaves, women, children, and resident aliens. So, although Athens was a democracy, it certainly was not a completely egalitarian or equal society. The democracy was not unlike our own during the colonial period. The Declaration of Independence may have said that all men were created equal and that they each had inalienable rights, but in practice this did not apply to all persons living in America. Rather, democracy and its direct benefits were limited to only some white males. In Athens, too, only certain men could vote.

#### 3.2 Autonomy and alliances

While Athens was a democracy, Sparta (from whence the San Jose State University "Spartans" derive their name) was an oligarchy, or government of the few. These "few" tended to be the noble and the wealthy. The city-states enjoyed full autonomy: each had its own form of government; each had its own "patron" god-for Athens this was Athena, the goddess of wisdom; for Sparta, this was Poseidon, the god of the sea. The city-states also enjoyed alliances among themselves. Alliances were formed because of trade, cultural games (the Olympics!), and for mutual defense from those outside Greece.

#### 3.3 Colonial expansion and Athenian dominance

Athens engaged in a tremendous period of colonial expansion, some of which involved the brutal domination of other territories and peoples outside Greece, throughout the Mediterranean area and the Black Sea. Athens was the dominant city-state in Greece. It had a magnificent navy, excellent harbors, led the other city-states in various sorts of trade, and it had a good store of natural resources.

### 3.4 War, war, and more war

Between 490 and 480 Persia (present day Iran) attacked Greece. Athens and Sparta joined forces to defeat the Persians. The Persians figured out a way to defeat the Greeks, however. They used the method of "divide and conquer," pitting the Greek city-states against each other. Soon the always testy alliance between Sparta and Athens fell apart and the two would be engaged in skirmishes and minor battles for years.

### 3.5 The Golden Age of Athens

During the period from the 6th century to the period after the Persian Wars, Athenian art, literature, philosophy, architecture, commerce, and social life flourished. Under Pericles, a military hero who became the political leader of Athens in the 5th century, the Acropolis was rebuilt and construction of the Parthenon was begun. Many of the magnificent buildings and statues from ancient Athens that are familiar to us today were built under the Pericles' rule. Here are some pictures.

### 3.6. The Peloponnesian War

After years of bickering and skirmishing, Pericles led Athens into a major war against Sparta in 431, a few years before Plato was born. (The war became known as the "Peloponnesian War" because of the name of the southern peninsula of Greece where Sparta was located.) The war would last for about 27 years and would completely drain Athens and Sparta. At the same time that the Peloponnesian War broke out, so did a horrible plague. The plague killed approximately a third of the entire population of Greece.

### 3.7 Political instability

Pericles died in 429, not too long after the Peloponnesian War began. His death left a political and military vacuum. Pericles had been a staunch proponent of democracy, but by 411 the Athenian democracy was overthrown by a right-wing, conservative revolution. In place of a democracy, a 500 person council took power for a brief two year period. Democracy was restored, but the War continued, even though there were opportunities to accept a peace treaty. Athens fought on, in large part spurred on by the nationalistic rhetoric that was swayed many Athenians.

In 404, Sparta defeated and humiliated Athens. Its navy was in shambles, thousands of its soldiers and sailors were killed in battle or captured, tortured, and killed. Sparta abolished the democracy and established a rule much like their own oligarchy: They put a group of tyrants in charge. These were Spartan sympathizers, and anti-democrats known as "The Thirty." Plato's great-uncle, Critias, was one of them. Others included people who had been known to be among those who had conversed with Socrates and were perceived to be his associates.

Many Athenians accepted the rule of the Thirty. To a degree they blamed democracy for the demise of Athenian power. In the democracy, majority rule often meant that the most ill-prepared persons rose to positions of authority and power. The Thirty were men of the upper

classes: well-educated, and, presumably, rational men. People hoped that these leaders would help restore a sense of dignity to the Athenian people. Their hopes were misplaced because the Thirty soon began to behave like the tyrants that they were. They had their opponents jailed, they had people assassinated, they tried to intimidate citizens-including Socrates-into breaking the law. Socrates refused to go along with them.

### 3.8 Restoration of democracy

There were people who continued to support the ideals of democracy. Many of these were former civic leaders and generals. One of these was Anytus, a general. We'll meet Anytus again when we read the Apology. These began a movement to restore democracy in Athens. Sparta refused to help the Thirty, and in 403, the Thirty were removed from power and democracy restored. Once again, Athenians, Plato among them, hoped that there would finally be a sane, moderate government in place. Unfortunately, it was this group who put Socrates to death in 399.

Now for the "big question": What is philosophy?

## 4. What is Philosophy?

### 4.1 The love of wisdom

Etymology is a wonderful tool. From it we can begin to discern the meaning of "philosophy." The word is formed from the Greek verb *philein* (pronounced "phil-ain" - the 'ei' in *philein* is a long 'A' sound as in "weight." *Philein* means "to love". *Sophia* is the Greek word for wisdom. So, philosophy is the love of wisdom. A philosopher is a lover of wisdom. May you all become philosophers!

### 4.2 Origins of philosophy

Questions play a key role in philosophy. All sorts of questions. Perhaps the first questions ancient peoples asked were: "Where did everything come from?" "Why do certain things happen? For example, "Why does the sky thunder?" The first answers to these questions arose from myth. People looked to stories of gods, demons, spirits, and the like to answer these questions. We could account for the thunder by speculating that Zeus must be angry, for instance.

From myth we move to religion. Someone such as Freud would say that there really isn't much difference between the two: both are signs of a non-rational, at best, and irrational, at worst, attempt to cope with the problems and questions of life.

Last, we come to philosophy, in particular, natural philosophy. Here we begin to see a search for laws and what we call "rational" (as opposed to religious or divine) explanations for natural phenomena. The early philosophers, those we refer to as the pre-Socratic philosophers, developed scores of accounts for why things were the way they were. I commend to you the study of the pre-Socratics. We do not have much material here, just a few fragments for each, but their thought is very interesting, unusual, quirky, and downright fun. Here is a small sampling of their thought:

Some looked to the elements (earth, water, fire, air) for the one organizing principle of the universe. Thales, for instance, thought it was water. Anaximander thought that it couldn't be just one or any of the basic elements because he felt that each of them was destroyed by its opposite (cold by hot, dry by wet, and so on). He suggested that the basic constituent of all there is was something called "the Unlimited" or "the boundless." Democritus believed that world consisted of atoms (from the Greek  $\alpha$  = not and  $\tau$  = cut).

Empedocles thought that things really could be explained by the principles of love and strife. Heraclitus, too, sometimes referred to this principle as "love and strife," sometimes as *logos* ("word", "reason", "account"). Anaxagoras believed that there was a little bit of everything in everything. He also thought that the organizing principle in the cosmos was Mind or "Nous" in Greek. In the beginning was Mind, and everything derived from it. There's almost the sense that everything "spun off" from it.

Some of their ideas are profound and seem to presage some of our scientific understanding of the cosmos. Some of their ideas are pretty far out. Were they on drugs? Sometimes it reads like it. Check out the pre-Socratics. You can read everything that survives from their writings in just a couple of hours.

#### 4.3 Ethical philosophy

So far, we talked about what's out there: the nature of the universe. But there was also a move inward, a questioning about the self and society. What forms the basis of the "good life"? What is entailed in being truly successful or leading an excellent life? How does one achieve what the Greeks called "virtue" or "excellence" (in Greek "arete")?

#### 4.4 Enter the Sophists.

The Sophists were so-called "Practitioners of philosophy." These were men skilled in rhetoric who taught debating and argumentation skills-for a fee. Sophists bragged that they could discuss any topic whatsoever and produce convincing arguments on either side. Gorgias and Protagoras were two of the most renowned sophists. Plato wrote dialogues named after each of them. Protagoras was famous for saying: "Man is the measure of all things." What did he mean? Mostly, he meant that there was no absolute truth of the matter. I say, I judge, what is truth. I am the measure, the arbiter, of what is right and wrong because what is right is what is right for me.

In the Athenian democracy, how was influence and power achieved and secured? In large part, just as it is today: by being able to persuade others. Who could win over the majority of voters or one's peers? The one who could convince and manipulate others. Sophists (and those they trained) had the reputation of being able to make "the weaker argument, the stronger." What's that mean? Well, remember the lame excuses you told your parents or boss or significant other? Perhaps if you were really good at it, they believed you.

The act of making the weaker argument the stronger is like that of making the "bogus" argument or explanation win over against a truly legitimate argument or explanation. You might think of

"Slick Willy" (aka President Clinton) and his uncanny ability to talk his way out of trouble. Remember, when you get good at this, you, too, can "argue" with the opposing side and have the debate come down to what the meaning of "is" is!

#### 4.5 Enter Socrates

Socrates was an Athenian, well-known by all. We know a good deal about Socrates, actually. We know that his mother may have been a midwife and his father a stonemason. We know that he served in the military with distinction and that he was quite strong. We know that he was not an example of the handsome, buffed Greek Adonis. No, Socrates was more than plain: Some thought he was rather ugly. He's described as having the following characteristics: snub nose, bulging eyes, short, bow-legged, and balding. One almost gets the idea that he looked like those little troll dolls that used to be so popular. Of course, he would be the first to say that it is not what's on the outside that matters; it is what's inside that counts. We'll learn much more about Socrates' outlook on life very shortly.

He was despised by some (e.g., the people who felt humiliated and embarrassed when he challenged their pretension and revealed inconsistencies in their views); loved by others. Many young men, including Plato, followed Socrates around Athens, listening in on his discussions with the politicians, artists, sophists, generals—just about anyone who would consent to discourse with him.

Although he was accused of being a sophist, Socrates was not. Socrates did not consider himself a teacher; he was a "questioner", a seeker. He never wrote any texts, he never charged a fee (the way the sophists did) for others to engage in conversation with him. Unlike the sophists, Socrates cared deeply about getting to "the bottom of things." He care about the truth of the matter, whatever that "matter" was. He sought to know the answers to ethical questions: what is virtue, really? what is courage, really? and, as you well know, what is piety, really?

As you've seen thus far, Socrates is willing to take questions such as those above, and follow the answers to them wherever they may lead. He apparently never tired of thinking about ethical issues and asking others about the same. In fact, there's a joke among contemporary philosophers that Hell would be spending eternity in Heaven with Socrates!

#### Summary

In this lecture you were introduced to the historical, social, and philosophical background of Athens from the 8th to 4th centuries BCE. You should have an understanding of the following: (1) the political unrest of this period, (2) what the word "philosophy" means, (3) the development of philosophy from the age of myth and religion, to natural philosophy and ethical (or social) philosophy, (4) you should know who the sophists were, and last, (5) you should know a bit about who Socrates was, some of his characteristics, and what distinguished him from the sophists.