

Introduction to Greek Philosophy

The Axial (or Axis) Age is a term coined by German philosophy Karl Jaspers (800-200 BCE) in a book called *The Origin and Goal of History* (1949).

We began class looking at Asian traditions of the Axial Age. Now we turn to the Greeks.

Major Ancient Branches of Philosophy

Logic (How do we communicate and understand one another?)

Metaphysics (What is the nature of reality? Also **ontology** or what is the nature of being / existence?)

Ethics / Moral Philosophy (How ought we behave with one another? / what is right action?): Later branches of ethics: deontology, virtue ethics, consequentialism, utilitarianism, ethical egoism, ethical relativism

Epistemology: The study of the nature of knowledge or How do we know what we know?

Major Offshoots in Philosophy:

Aesthetic Philosophy: study of the nature of the senses / beauty

Political Philosophy: deliberate action regarding the future of a community

Religion: studying the prescriptive and traditional

More Recent Areas:

Axiology (the study of values)

Philosophy of Mind

Phenomenology

Critical Theory

Philosophy of Race

Philosophy of Science

These areas often intersect with one another.

The Greek Beginnings...

Greeks were aware that there were lots of different cultures in the world.

They asked themselves: What does it take to communicate with each other? Language

They developed an *ethnocentric* view of social life that divided Greek speaking people against “barbarians” who could not speak the language.

They eventually developed an educational system based on three parts:

Classical Trivium: Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric

Grammar

Eight Parts of Speech:

nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, adverbs, interjections, conjunctions

In Greek, *logos* = Anglo-Saxon and English for “word”

In Latin, *verbum* = Anglo-Saxon and English for “word”

Logic

Logic, for Greeks, meant the way things (including words) are put together.

In what ways do we put words together to understand each other? We study not just the words themselves but the way they are strung together in sequence or *syntax*. In some ways we can think of the study of logic as the study of understanding or what makes sense without contradictions. For the Greeks this especially meant math in its most basic sense of arithmetic (adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing). For them, and especially Plato, the unchanging and eternally true was the source of all beauty.

But the fact is, we live in a changing world, where time passes and things change. Our bodies change, our lives change. People we care about die or get sick.

Various teachers over the centuries developed techniques for living the best or “true” life. They were called “sophists” or wise ones or teachers. Philosophy is the love of wisdom or the love of learning.

Philosophers ask: How do we live a good life? And What is “the good”? These are fundamental questions.

Little-discussed fact: Ancient Greek Philosophy began with the Milesians from Miletus (Lydia: Modern day Turkey)

Thales (circa 626/623 – c. 548/545 BC): “Know thyself” on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi (in is attribute

Thales saw the primordial element of the cosmos (*arche*) as water. Still today, we hear Native Americans say, “water is life” or in Lakota (*mni wíčóni*).

Milesian Philosophers:

Anaximander (c. 610 – c. 546 BCE)

Anaximenes (c. 586/585 – c. 526/525 BCE)

Pythagoras of Samos (c. 570 – c. 495 BCE) possibly studies with the Milesians

Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 500)

Democritus of Abdera (c. 460-370 BCE)

Empedocles of Sicily (c. 494 – c. 434 BCE, Sicily)

Protagoras of Abdera (c. 490 BC – c. 420 BCE)

Gorgias of Sicily (483–375 BCE, Sicily)

Greek Philosophers:

Socrates of Athens (c. 470-399 BCE)

Plato of Athens (c. 428/427 or 424/423 – 348/347 BCE)

Aristotle of Macedonia (384-382 BCE)

When Socrates names sophists of his time, they had come to be experts in philosophy, rhetoric, music, mathematics, and athletics. They also brought foreign influences to Athens.

Broader Historical / Political context:

Egyptian Pharaohs: 3150 BCE – 30 BCE (Conquered by Roman Empire)

Solon (630 BCE – 560 BCE) Athenian statesman visits Egypt and gains some ideas for government.

Earlier Greek Mycenaean Empire had writing though later lost and re-introduced by Phoenicians after its fall: Empire = 1750-1050 BCE “Bronze Age”

In (what we now call) the Middle East:

- Paleo-Hebrew script was pulled from Canaanites' phonetic / syllabic language. All other Semitic languages adopted Canaanite script, used until 586 BCE.
- The temple mount = ancient acropolis of Jerusalem was built by Solomon, expanding the city north and west.
- Jerusalem was not Israelite until David conquered it from the Jebusites. Jerusalem was politically neutral to the 12 tribes until founding of city of David.
- Solomon (c. 970-930) had many wives, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, Hittites, who were all political alliances through marriages & the Temple was their house. The united monarchy ends with the death of Solomon: Israel = North, Samaria; Judah = South, Jerusalem: 9th & 8th cent. BCE
- 722 BCE Assyrian Empire conquers the north. 701 BCE invades Judah. *Hezekiah* recounts attacks from Lachish siege. The ramp remains, carved reliefs show battering rams, etc. The biblical account defends Jerusalem through a plague among soldiers but the Assyrian account says the soldiers were replaced by Babylonians (from southern Mesopotamia)
- 586 BCE, fall of the first temple, Babylonian exile.
- King David begins to be written about after the Babylonian exile as the forerunner for a future restorative process. David historically moved the Jewish capitol to Jerusalem. After David, Solomon builds first temple. 586 BCE marks end of "first stage of Jewish history"
- Cyrus of Persia (539 BCE) allows Jews to return to Zion and begin rebuilding temple (second temple), completed around 516 BCE and destroyed in 70CE. Babylonian exile =
- After 586 BCE Aramaic script was introduced (still used today). Phoenicians also take Canaanite script and re-introduce writing to Greece after fall of Mycenaean Empire. This shift introduces vowels to Greece by changing the script. A 9th/10th century Hebrew Stele mentions David.

In Asia:

China:

Confucius (c. 551- c. 479 BCE)

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* c. 400 BCE

Master Zhuang *Zhuangzi* (c. 369 – 286 BCE)

India

"Buddha" "Enlightened One" Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563- c. 480 BCE)

Vedas – Hindu texts

In Persia

Zoroastrianism: Zoroaster lives somewhere between 1500 BCE and not later than 500 BCE.

He's often dated between 1500 BCE and 1000 BCE. Plato mentions him in *Alcibiades*

Cyrus the Great (c. 600–530 BCE): Allows Jews to return from exile

Darius the Great (c. 550 – 486 BCE)
Xerxes (c. 518 – August 465 BC)

Historical Events:

Cleisthenes (c. 570-508 BCE) makes changes in ancient Athenian constitution around 510 BCE, converting it to a democracy.

Persians (first Darius and later Xerxes) invade Greece multiple times and are eventually pushed back. Battle of Marathon: 490 BCE

480 BCE Battle of Salamis – Athens had been overrun but Greeks fight back

478 Delian League established between Greek city states

479-431 “Golden Age” under Pericles. Major artistic and cultural flourishing.

Athens comes to dominate league and Spartans get mad. Relations breakdown between Greek city-states. The Peloponnesian war (431-404 BCE) is the result. Athens suffers greatly.

Spartans win, establish 30 tyrants as government. Critias (close relative of Plato is among the tyrants, sometimes referred to as the uncle of Socrates)

In 399 BCE Socrates is executed.

During war Socrates fights and saves Alcibiades, an Athenian statesman. Socrates refuses on a jury to condemn generals who had fled a battle to death. He also doesn't seem to like democracy. Socrates' father is a sculptor, his mother a midwife. He's notably ugly. There's sexual tension with younger men.

Athens is devastated and closed off. Socrates enjoys talking to lots of people in the city. Euthyphro lives outside the city on his father's farm.

Socratic Irony (someone says something but means the opposite). He praises people when making fun of them.

How does all this context affect our reading of the “Allegory of the Cave” from Plato's *Republic* (380 BCE)?