

Socrates and the Sophists: A Brief Introduction

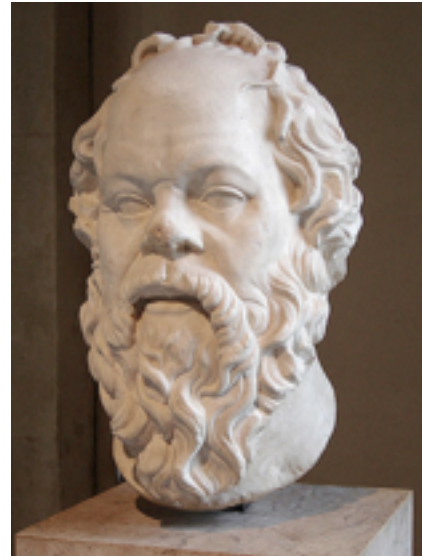
Socratic Philosophy

Socrates was born in 469 BCE. He was forty years old in 429 when Pericles died and the short-lived Athenian democracy collapsed. The trial of Socrates for “corrupting the youth” of Athens, his punishment and death took place in 399 BC.

Socrates, who engaged others in philosophy through conversation and is said to have written down none of his “teachings”, made a deep impression on Plato in attempting to formulate an alternative approach to philosophy combining free inquiry with elements of “the old religion”.

His methodology included pursuing the universal **essence** of a thing. Socrates emphasized two sorts of issues, those concerning:

1. **definitions** of such concepts as justice, truth, beauty, and knowledge; and
2. **human goodness** — practical questions about what we ought to do and how we should live our lives. “How can we make ourselves and our children better and more successful human beings?” “Can virtue be taught?” “Is persuasion the best way to get what we want from others?” “Is it really better to be harmed unjustly than to do harm to another?” “Is it better to be concerned for the welfare of others than for oneself?”



Socrates (Louvre), Photo: Sting

According to Socrates, the answers to the first set of questions concerning definitions are necessary for gaining insight into the nature of goodness. In seeking definitions Socrates was not looking for the meanings associated with words or the contents of one’s concepts, but was trying to look through these to the **real natures** that lie behind them. “What is it that makes all beautiful things beautiful?” “What is courage and what does it take to be courageous?” According to Socrates, I can know what the word “beauty” means without knowing what it takes to make something beautiful, and I can know what the word “courage” means without knowing what I must do if I am to be courageous.

To understand and appreciate why this quest for universal truths was so important to Socrates, we have to keep in mind what Socrates was opposing — the **sophists** and the new attitudes prevalent in Athens at the time.

The Challenge of Sophism

Sophists were traveling teachers who offered to prepare students for professions in law, business and politics, with a view to enabling one to live successfully and efficiently in a given city-state.¹ They taught **persuasive rhetoric** and **moral relativism**. So, for example, if you wanted to become a successful politician in ancient Greece, you would have to know how to convince and please those in power. But what it takes to please may vary from one city-state to the next. So, you would have to be able to conform to local conventions in order to be persuasive, and that entails being familiar with, and adapting to, local customs. This is the “skill” the sophist teaches.

¹ Note that “sophist” is related to “sophisticated”, lit. “knowledge of different places and cultures”.

The sophist presupposes no **absolute** or **universal values**. In other words, there is no criterion of **virtue** apart from **success**, and no criterion of **justice** apart from the **dominant practice** of a particular city-state.

This way of thinking gives rise to a moral and social conundrum: How is one to have respect for any particular way of life if it's based on nothing more substantial than arbitrary conventions? But then again what is the alternative? In what sense could the law carry any real **authority**? It appears that the world according to the Sophist leads ultimately to the "tyranny of self-interest".

To see how this works, consider the following argument proposed by the sophist:

1. Both in the animal kingdom and in foreign affairs, the strong oppress and control the weak. (This is a fact established by means of empirical observation.) On what basis can we say this behavior is wrong or unjust?
2. If we assume that laws are not "given by the gods", then one possible source of authority is ruled out.
3. But if the laws are not given by the gods, they must be nothing more than mere conventions adopted by the weak to limit those who are powerful enough to dominate others.
4. Thus, while breaking a civil law might be *called* unjust, it is not so clear that it really is unjust. That's because the law, according to the sophist, has no **authority**, i.e. nothing other than the rule of power to which one might appeal in order to justify it.
5. If that's the case, then perhaps we should obey a law only when it is in our interests to do so, e.g. when breaking the law would result in our being caught and punished. (This is called the principle of "enlightened self-interest".)
6. So it makes sense to concern ourselves with the welfare of the weaker only when it's in our interests to do so.
7. This is obviously bad news for the weak who must either, (a) appeal to a higher law, e.g. religion, in order to improve their conditions, or (b) acquire the power of persuasion.
8. It follows that the world is governed by a **tyranny of self-interest**. It is a place where everyone acts in their own interests, where laws and justice vary from place to place, where the weak must devise ways of circumventing the fact that "might makes right", and where laws are foisted on the powerful to mitigate the war of all against all.² In such a world "virtue" is nothing more than success in getting what you want.

The Socratic Response

Socrates argues for an alternative understanding of the situation.

1. He starts with the observation that what a child **wants** and what is **good** for the child are often two different things. For example, playing near the deep water before learning how to swim may be desirable from the child's perspective, but it is not in general a good practice.
2. Getting what you want is not the only criterion for success or virtue. The truth is somewhat more subtle than the sophist would lead you to believe.
3. Socrates both agrees and disagrees with the sophist:
 - Yes, we should act in our own best interests, i.e. we should do what is best for ourselves. There is no justice — no morality — apart from what is in one's own best interests **overall**.
 - But it does **not** follow from this that **virtue** is nothing more than success in getting what you want. Nor that **justice** is merely conventional and varies from place to place. That's because **care for oneself demands concern for the welfare of others**.
4. In fact, Socrates believes that **virtue is knowledge** and that moral failing and weakness of the will can always be explained by appeal to **ignorance**.

² For discussions of this principle, see Antiphon B44; Critias B25; Plato's *Gorgias*, *Republic* I; Aristophanes' *Clouds*; Thucydides V. 89-111, III. 36-50.

How are we to understand this link between virtue and knowledge?

Virtue is skill and excellence in human activity. So, for example, the skill of the shoemaker is **knowing** the purpose and function of shoes and how to make shoes consistent with that purpose. Notice that there is no **moral** aspect implied in this sense of “virtue”. Rather, virtue is a kind of **knowledge** which involves having a definite task to perform, and having a goal or purpose that one can understand and reach. By analogy, to talk about the virtue of living as a human being (as the sophists did), we need to know the function or goal of life **for human beings**. This is where the need for definitions comes into play.

Now Socrates never directly answers this question of the goal or purpose of human life. Rather, he uses the method of **elenchus** to make others aware of the **need** for such a search. This involves two stages:

1. Acknowledge one’s own ignorance.³
2. Collect **instances** where the relevant concept applies — good, beautiful, or just things — and then look for a common quality, which would be the **universal** or **essence**.

So, for example, in trying to formulate a theory of art I would first acknowledge that I don’t know what art is, and then look for things that are widely and, if possible, uncontroversially accepted as exemplary works of art and try to discern the one essential quality they all share.

This process should lead one to knowledge of the essence or real nature of a thing. But, for Socrates, that is still not enough. He believes that real knowledge includes both

1. the capacity for making distinctions and **seeing** into the real nature of things, and
2. the ability to **act** in harmony with that understanding.

Given that the two are inseparable, to **see** the good and to **do** what is good are necessary and sufficient for one’s knowledge of the good. Knowing the purpose and the good for human beings and acting in harmony with that purpose are one.

It follows that “no one errs willingly” — no one **chooses** to do that which she **knows** is **not** good. According to Socrates, if I do something that is not good, my action is the result of **ignorance**, i.e. an **intellectual error**, not a **moral failure**. I must have **thought** it was good. And if I had known it was not good, I would not have done it.

Therefore, the only way to help others is to promote knowledge of what is good for them.⁴ As was pointed out above, this knowledge is achieved through **dialectic**, i.e. a method of looking into “the real nature of things”.

Timothy Quigley, revised 24 Jun 2016

³ Note the difference here between the proposition (a) “Knowledge is impossible” (the skepticism of the Sophist) and the less extreme proposition (b) “Everyone, including experts, lack knowledge” (Socrates).

⁴ Socrates’ view follows from his **definition** of knowledge. If we change the definition of knowledge, we change the consequences for weakness of the will (*akrasia*).