

Notes on Socrates

Christopher L. Holland

January 14, 2025

1 Background

1.1 Pre-Socratic Philosophy (6th Cent B.C.)

- Most pre-Socratic philosophers were interested in what we might call *natural philosophy*.
- Philosophical questions:
 - What is the nature of reality?
 - Is it made up of one substance or many?
- Their answers:
 - Thales (625–545 B.C.): Water
 - Anaximander (ca. 612–545 B.C.): A neutral material he called the boundless or infinite
 - Anaximenes (585–528 B.C.): Air
 - Pythagoras (580–496 B.C.): Numbers
 - Parmenides (540–470 B.C.): Being
 - Heraclitus (535–475 B.C.): Fire
 - Leucippus (ca. 450 B.C.) and Democritus (460–370 B.C.): Atoms
 - Empedocles (ca. 450): 4 elements: water, earth, air, and fire; two central principles: love and hate
 - Anaxagoras (500–428 B.C.): *Nous* or Mind (a material airy substance; pure, rare and having power over everything else)
- Early science based on the pre-Socratic tradition
 - Thales (625–545 B.C.): correctly predicted a solar eclipse visible in Asia Minor on May 28, 585 B.C.
 - Parmenides (540–470): the moon receives its light from the sun
 - Empedocles (ca. 450): a solar eclipse is caused by the moon passing in front of the sun
 - Eudoxus of Cnidus (ca. 400–350 B.C.): applied geometry to astronomy and declared that the earth was spherical
 - Eratosthenes (ca 276–194): calculated the circumference of the earth to be about 252,000 stades. (See <https://old.maa.org/press/periodicals/convergence/eratosthenes-and-the-mystery-of-the-stades>)
 - Aristarchus of Samos (ca. 230 B.C.): formulated a heliocentric view of the universe

1.2 The Sophist

- Sophist — based on the Greek word for ‘wise’
 - Paid teachers of philosophy and rhetoric
 - More interested in persuasion than truth
 - *Eristics*: they taught argument and rhetoric as a contest
 - Aristotle accused them of “fighting dirty” (*On Sophistical Refutations* 171b)

- Interested in financial and political success
- Major focus: How to win court cases.
- Skeptics and pragmatists
- Many were secularists (skeptical about religion) – but they also advised people to participate in religious affairs for pragmatic/practical reasons.
- Moral relativists
- Sophistry: Making the weaker argument appear stronger

2 Socrates (470–399 B.C.)

It was Socrates who first called philosophy down from the sky, and brought it into the cities and even introduced it into homes, and compelled it to consider life and morals, good and evil.

— Cicero

2.1 Socrates compared to the Sophist

- Same questions:
 - How should I live?
 - What is virtue?
 - How can I succeed in life?
- But with a truth-centered method

2.2 Socrates on Education

The Socratic Method A method of teaching that uses questions to help students discover the answers for themselves

Dialectic A process of reasoning or intellectual conversation in which arguments and counterarguments, or thesis and counterthesis, are continually juxtaposed in order to discover the truth of a matter.

2.3 Socrates on Moral Philosophy (from Pojman 2006, 51–52)

1. Care for the soul is all that matters.
2. Self-knowledge is a prerequisite for the good life.
3. Virtue is knowledge
 - No such thing as weakness of will.
 - Evil is ignorance.
I am fairly sure of this—that none of the wise men considers that anybody ever willingly errs or willingly does base and evil deeds; they are well aware that all who do base and evil things do them unwillingly” (Protagorus 345d–e).
4. You cannot harm a good person, but by trying to harm someone else, you harm yourself.
 - The Good is good for you, and the Bad is bad for you.
 - It is better to suffer evil than to do evil.
5. The autonomy of ethics (we’ll come back to this in Module 5)

Reference

Pojman, Louis P. 2006. *Philosophy: The Pursuit of Wisdom*. 5th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.