Ancient Greek Thinkers: Socrates and Plato lead the way

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"The School of Athens," by Raphael painted for Pope Julius III in 1509. In the center Plato speaks with Aristotle. Image from: Godong/UIG via Getty Images

The citizens of Athens were fed up with the old "wise" man.

Socrates, one of ancient Greece's most knowledgeable philosophers, found himself on trial for his teachings. He was accused of corrupting the youth of the city of Athens. A jury of hundreds found Socrates guilty and sentenced him to death.

At the age of 70, Socrates willingly drank hemlock, a powerful poison that ended his life. How did it happen that Athenians put to death such a great philosopher?

A man with many questions

Throughout his entire life, Socrates questioned everything from Athenian government to Greek religion and the gods themselves. His goal was to find the truth, which he believed could be reached through reason and knowledge. Socrates was a teacher, but he did not have a classroom, any books, or even a school. Instead, Socrates lectured publicly. Anyone who was interested in what he had to say was invited to listen.

Socrates practiced a style of teaching that has since become known as the Socratic method. Essentially, Socrates taught through questioning. He started with simple questions, then progressed to more complicated, deeper questions. Through the use of reason and logic, Socrates found answers to many questions that led to a greater understanding of the world.

Problems arose because Socrates often questioned the very foundations of Greek society. His constant questioning was seen as dangerous by many and ultimately led to his death.

Plato's vision of his "Republic"

Plato, a student of Socrates, also achieved greatness as a philosopher. Unlike Socrates, however, Plato chose to write down his ideas. In one of his most famous works, "The Republic," Plato outlined his vision of the ideal state.

Surprisingly, Plato's republic was not very democratic. Plato was greatly disturbed at the way the mass of Athenians had agreed to put to death his brilliant teacher, Socrates. Plato believed that uneducated people should not have the right to make important decisions for everyone.

Instead, Plato imagined a society in which people were divided into different classes. Each class contributed what it could. In Plato's ideal society, farmers grew the food for the republic, soldiers defended the republic and a group of educated philosophers ruled the republic. Not surprisingly, Plato lived at a time when democracy in Athens was in decline.

Aristotle's planetary observations are just a bit off

One of Plato's students, Aristotle, also distinguished himself as a thinker. Aristotle wrote about and studied many subjects, including science, literature, ethics, logic, art and more. He emphasized the importance of observation and the gathering of information.

Although Aristotle made important discoveries in many areas, his explanation of the movement of the planets was wrong. Aristotle believed that the Earth was the center of the universe, and that all planets revolved around it. This makes sense from an observational standpoint. Looking up at the sky, it seemed to Aristotle that everything – the sun, moon and stars – circled the Earth. In this case, Aristotle's dependence on observation led him astray. The Earth only seems to be the center of everything because it revolves on its own axis.

A golden age of thought

Besides those three great philosophers, ancient Greece produced many other important thinkers. In the area of science, Hippocrates applied logic to the field of medicine and collected information on hundreds of patients. His work helped to improve the understanding of disease and death.

Greek thinkers applied logic to mathematics as well. Pythagoras discovered multiplication tables and a rule relating to right triangles. Euclid revolutionized the field of geometry, the area of mathematics that deals with points, lines and shapes.

In the social sciences, Herodotus is often called the first modern historian. Another historian, Thucydides, tried to be as objective as possible in reporting the history he recorded.

Thinking matters

Many of these advancements and discoveries seem obvious by today's standards. But 2,500 years ago, most humans were concerned with providing food for their families and keeping them protected. Little else mattered. Most of them were ruled by kings or pharaohs who had complete power. The Athenian democracy encouraged countless innovative thoughts among its citizens.

To the ancient Greeks, thinking was serious business.

Quiz

1   According to the article, how did Plato's thoughts about society change after the death of Socrates?

      (A)   He believed that Athens should have more leaders.

      (B)   He questioned the idea of having different classes.

      (C)   He believed that dangerous questions should be avoided.

      (D)   He questioned the idea of Athenian democracy.

2   According to Aristotle, what is the best way to learn?

      (A)   collecting information from observations

      (B)   focusing on multiple subject areas

      (C)   studying history and being objective

      (D)   relying on questioning, reason and logic

3   Which of the following sentences from the article develops the idea that changes in society affected philosophers' ideas?

      (A)   Not surprisingly, Plato lived at a time when democracy in Athens was in decline.

      (B)   Aristotle believed that the Earth was the center of the universe, and that all planets revolved around it.

      (C)   In the social sciences, Herodotus is often called the first modern historian.

      (D)   But 2,500 years ago, most humans were concerned with providing food for their families and keeping them protected.

4   How is the structure in the section "Plato's vision of his Republic" different from the section "A golden age of thought"?

      (A)   "Plato's vision of his Republic" discusses the most important contributions of a philosopher, while "A golden age of thought" does not.

      (B)   "Plato's vision of his Republic" highlights a thinker who rejected democracy, while "A golden age of thought" focuses on thinkers who embraced democracy.

      (C)   "Plato's vision of his Republic" includes reasons for why a thinker adopted a certain philosophy, while "A golden age of thought" does not.

      (D)   "Plato's vision of his Republic" addresses the vision of a highly educated philosopher, while "A golden age of thought" highlights the visions of less-educated philosophers.