

# Chapter 3

## Introduction: What is and is it to study ancient philosophy?

### 3.1 What is the ancient world? – a little bit of history

By no means is the following meant a complete history of ancient Greece. This is only meant to help you to find your way through a very rich and complex period of history. Note also that dates are approximative.

Extension of the period of study: 500-350 BCE, a period which could be roughly dubbed The Raise and Fall of Ancient Greece.

#### **Classical Period : 500-330 BC**

- Great prosperity after the Persian wars
  - 444-429 BC Pericles - Golden Age of Athens
  - The Greek miracle :
    - First Democracy (note that women, foreigners and slaves are not citizens)
    - Development of art, science and philosophy
- 450 History : Herodotus
- 447-432 Architecture (among others): Parthenon
- 430 History: Thucydides

435-399 Philosophy: Socrates teaches in Athens (399 Socrates' Trial and Death)

387-339 Philosophy: Plato and the Academy

335-322 Philosophy: Aristotle and Lyceum

Socrates – Plato – Aristotle: the master to pupil order.

- Peloponnesian war – between Sparta and Athens – Athens surrenders in 404 BC

## 3.2 What is philosophy?

- The word: philo-sophy

The etymology of the word indicates that philosophy is not to be identified with wisdom itself, but with the interest (the search or the inquiry) for wisdom. Philosophy is an attempt to knowledge and wisdom, not wisdom and knowledge themselves. It is important to keep in mind that doing philosophy is practicing an **activity**, an activity of research, rather than pretending to possess the truth and try to force such “truth” on others. Philosophy a way to **both think and behave**. No sharp contrast between theoretical discourse and efficient practice should be made by a philosopher.

- Philosophy as a system:

A common view has it that the ethical stance of a philosopher stems from his epistemological and metaphysical views. A philosopher would then start with studying what the world is like and what relations men bear to the world. Only then is he in a position to deduce the way in which he ought to conduct his life.

A radical version of such position is Descartes foundationalist program. It is Descartes' ideal that the philosopher should deduce and organize knowledge from the foundations to the ultimate consequences. According to Descartes, the organization of all knowledge can be likened to a tree, of which metaphysics form the roots, physics the trunk and the different special sciences, among which medicine and the definite moral, form the branches.

- Ancient philosophical systems: the stoics' metaphor of the egg:

The idea is that Logic, Physics, and Ethics are parts of a whole.

The point is simple: your ethical principles are going to depend on what you think the world is like and how you can know it.

Example: contrast Stoics and Epicurians

- It will be important to keep in mind that philosophy and ethics are deeply entangled, whichever comes first, so that there is no philosophy without philosophical behavior.

It is indeed of high importance to remember that philosophers are generally men of action. Plato, for example, has spent a good amount of time trying to convert Dionysus II, tyrant of Syracuse, to philosophy. He ended up sold as a slave ! (he was bought back by some friend) To know more about these crazy stories, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*.

### 3.3 What is ancient philosophy?

#### Ancient Philosophers

- We will mainly deal with the **main philosophers of the classical period**. That is to say: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle
- Before Socrates are the **presocratics** (!): Thales, Heraclitus, Parmenides etc. These are important philosophers. However, I think they are even more difficult to study, in particular because of the sources' issue. That said, they were of high importance and influential, especially for the three philosophers we will study. I will have to make short points about their views, especially Heraclitus and Parmenides.
- Note that this **historical classification**, where Socrates's philosophy is considered revolutionary, is largely due to Plato himself. Lots of other philosophers and schools are left aside. The classification however survived the centuries and is just the most common one among academics. Its insufficiencies recognized, we will use it for commodity.

### Ancient philosophy main issues

**The issue of the *kosmos*** One of the main issue with which ancient philosophy is concerned is to give a rational account of the world's order.

- We live in a world which is subject to change, but not to pure chaos. There are observable regularities. That said, not everything is or at least seems in perfect order either (men's freedom, monsters of nature)

**Our world is thus of mixed nature.** It is subject neither to complete necessity, nor to complete randomness. A main common concern of ancient philosophies, whatever the multiple models and methods, is to account for this mixed nature of the world around us.

- Men had been wondering about the nature of the world around us before philosophy arised. So, what is the difference?

Before philosophies, there were **cosmogonies**, that is, mythical histories of the world as a battle between personified cosmic forces and gods. The first Greek thinkers (from Thales to Empedocles) rather aimed at a *rational* explanation of the history of the world by interactions between *physical* entities. In other words, philosophy was born with the will to naturalize our account of nature and the world.

**The ethical issue: How to lead a good life?** Socrates was probably one of the first to put the emphasis on moral issues, while Presocratics mainly constructed models of the physical world. He formulated and held highly controversial and counterintuitive ethical theses, e.g. that he would rather suffer from injustice than commit it.

Most schools of philosophy after Socrates, and certainly all of the schools we will study, have a specific ethical program. Most of them will seem very strange to you. In each case, their point is to behave consistently with what they think the world and human nature are.

**The issue of method: Argumentation** One of the most lasting influential feature of ancient philosophy is that philosophy was defined as an inquiry for truth through argumentative discussion. A philosopher want to accept a given statement as true only on the basis of a valid argument. There are different views on how the discussions should be led (oral dialogue or writing). In any case, the important point is that philosophy contrasts with:

- simple opinion, based on custom or obedience, in any case accepted without rational justification
- rhetoric, in which the aim is to *persuade* others with no consideration for the truth of the statement one argues for (We'll learn more about the sophists later – think also about political discourse nowadays)
- religion, where beliefs can, sometimes have to be based on trust, or faith

Arguably also, logic is a basis for the practice of philosophy. This is of course not the whole story. Philosophy's relation to opinion, persuasion and obedience has been much intricate than usually claimed. For a more nuanced view on the status of argument in philosophy, see J. Barnes's contribution in the *Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy*.

### 3.4 Why study ancient philosophy?

- Learning about our **forerunners**:
  - the influence of stoicism on the western morals
  - the influence of logic on the western rules of reasoning
  - the debate between the mechanical model and the teleological model in physics
  - and also : we'll understand the origins of some English words : "sophist", "platonian" etc. – and whether they correspond to their original philosophical meaning or not.
- But also, facing views and methods which are very different from ours, discovering the hidden assumptions and controversial consequences of these views and methods, catches **new light on our own views and methods**. We are compelled to confront the hidden assumptions and controversial consequences of our own views and methods. It should help raising questions about what we think is obvious, but which we in fact assumed without further thinking about it.

- Finally, studying history of philosophy does not only consists in learning the theses that some philosophers held in the past, but rather does it consists in **learning how to do philosophy**, that is, how to analyze, assess and finally formulate yourself valid arguments, and, who knows, how to adopt a coherent attitude in conducting your life!
- How to study ancient philosophy?:
  - Problem of **Controversies** in history of philosophy – different interpretations, no consensus
  - Even more difficult in the case of ancient philosophy: the issue of the sources – study from hand copied fragments and testimonia (See Sedley’s introduction to *Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy*)

### 3.5 Summing up

Philo-sophy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- desire to be wise</li> <li>- wisdom and knowledge go together</li> </ul>
Ancient: Raise and fall of Athens - the "greek miracle"	- Classical period: 500-350 B.C.E.
Ancient Philosophy	<p><i>Philosophers:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Presocratics</li> <li>- Socrates-Plato-Aristotle</li> <li>- Epicurism, Stoicism, Skepticism, Cynicism</li> </ul> <p><i>Philosophy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- kosmos</li> <li>- ethics</li> <li>- method of argumentation</li> </ul>