

Notes on Quiz #7: Athens in the Classical Period

1. Who were the sophists? How was what they did different from the work of philosophers?

Sophists taught the skill of arguing a question from any or all positions, as part of the art of rhetoric, in fifth-century Athens. Democracy in Athens created a market for this service, since effectively persuading other voters to your point of view was a valuable ability in a society where ordinary votes mattered. Critics charged that sophists taught the ability to argue a position regardless of truth or morality.

Unlike sophists, who taught a skill, philosophers as a group sought the spread and increase of knowledge and understanding, whether of the physical world or of human behavior. They tended to question received wisdom and superstition in order to develop more rational explanations. Those who taught philosophy, generally, were interested in teaching their students how to question things in order to discover truth; sophists, by contrast, taught their students how to give the most convincing answer regardless of its truth or value.

2. What is the debate over *nomos* vs. *physis* about? What are some implications for society if those who argue for *nomos* are right?

As Athens sought to achieve an ideal society, it was forced to confront the ultimate philosophic question: what is the source of morality? Some noted morality varies from city to city and county to country and argued that morality is *nomos*, whatever is agreed on in any one time and place; this suggests that morality is relative, and that it can be changed to suit whatever it is needed to be. The moral relativism of the sophists and the rhetoric they taught embodies this idea.

Others rejected moral relativism and argued that right and justice are *physis*, permanent laws of nature and therefore universal and unchangeable: what is right is always right. The real Socrates, unlike the cartoon of him presented by Aristophanes in *Clouds*, rejected the sophists and sought universal truths.

3. For today you read the rest of *Clouds*. What does Strepsiades do at the very end? What reasons does he give for doing it?

Pheidippides beats up his father, a shocking twist in the story and symbolizing the way shifting morals were leading Athenians to attack the very traditions and customs that made Athens strong. Remorseful over his willingness to be taught moral relativism and impiety by the sophists, Strepsiades later burns down the Thinkery.

EC1. All of the following are true of the Parthenon temple EXCEPT:

- (a) It is situated on the Acropolis
- ✓ (b) It was a place for the entire Athenian populace to gather together and worship Athena as a congregation
- (c) The Athenian treasury was kept in the back
- (d) It was named for, and meant to be the home of, Athena the Virgin (and her statue)

EC2. What was the agora, and why was it important?

The agora is the beating heart of the polis. The agora is the main marketplace of a polis, used not only for trading at merchants' stalls but for gathering, posting of laws, and public speeches. It was where news was exchanged, and the focus of social, political, and judicial activities. It represented the "outdoors" nature of the public space, where men were expected to spend their time.

The agora was surrounded by government buildings and public meeting places, including the buildings that housed the council and the board of strategoi, as well as altars, shrines, statues, inscriptions, fountains, and trophies of war. There could also be found shops, booksellers, bankers' tables, wholesale merchants, schools, and other kinds of public social and commercial interaction.