

This course gives an introduction to the philosophy of Plato (?428-348 BC), and thereby also to the Greek practice of philosophy, exploring different questions that the Greek philosophers dealt with and the motivations and methods of their different kinds of writing about them. A guide for understanding Plato's writings is given by the educational context of Plato's Academy. All the major schools of later Greek philosophy except the Epicureans – the Peripatetics (Aristotelians), Stoics, and sceptics – are split-offs from the Academy. The traditional Greek education consisted of "gymnastics," "music," and "grammar," each broadly construed. Both Plato and his rival educators, the older "sophists" Protagoras (?480-411) and Gorgias (?480-380) and Plato's contemporary Isocrates (436-338), argue that this traditional training is not enough to teach you either how to manage the state well, or how to manage even your own life and household well, and that some further discipline is needed. This higher education will be called "philosophy," but different teachers offer training in different disciplines under this name. For many of Plato's rivals, the core of higher education is rhetoric, the art of public speaking; others teach "physics" or natural history, the study of the origins and natures of things including human beings and their societies; others teach mathematics, and others dialectic, the art of argument, and especially refutation, by question and answer. Plato thinks that neither the old education nor the available varieties of the new education are sufficient. Plato takes Socrates as his countermodel to the sophists: while Socrates does not claim to teach how to succeed in life or in politics, he uses dialectic to convince his conversation-partners that their present knowledge is insufficient, and that, in order to be successful, they need a further knowledge of how to live well.

In looking for a kind of knowledge that would be sufficient to guide individual and political life, Plato takes up the sophists' discussions about the "arts" or teachable disciplines. The sophists believe that civilization progresses through the progressive discovery of the arts, they proclaim the invention of new arts, and they try to analyze how the previous discoveries in the arts were made and why they work; and they ask which of the traditional practices in the arts are merely habits or conventions, and which really work because they have some foundation in the nature of things. Model arts, for those who want to analyze existing arts or to create new ones, are medicine and mathematics (including arithmetic and geometry but also mechanics and optics and music-theory and astronomy). Medical writers (whose works are preserved under the name of "Hippocrates") reflect on the conditions for acquiring the knowledge that supports successful medical practice: they disagree about how far, beyond experience, it requires hypotheses (as in mathematics), knowledge of causes, or knowledge of the nature of things.

