

# THE ANCIENT GREEKS AND THEIR IDEAS ON HUMAN VALUES

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## Setting the Stage

Imagine Socrates spending his days walking the streets of Athens asking questions of the people to make them think. What types of questions make us think?

Can we ever use a wrong means to achieve a good end?

With all the modern conveniences and changes in the way people live from the time of the Ancient Greeks, how can their ideas of 2500 years ago possibly apply to us today?

Is it right for people with influence or authority, such as people with money or political power, to decide what is morally right or acceptable in a society?

## Introduction

The early Greek philosophers, between 600 and 300 BC, established the foundation for ethics in western culture that survives to this day. The three greatest of these philosophers were Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

Socrates (469-399 BC) became well known to the citizens of Athens as he walked the streets encountering people and asking them questions to made them think. He was a man with great common sense, judged by the Oracle at Delphi to be the wisest of men, because he knew that he did not know everything. Socrates never wrote anything and yet, may well be the most quoted of all the Greek philosophers.

Plato (426-384 BC) was a student of Socrates whose many writings provide a record of Socrates' thought. *The Republic* is his most famous work which summarizes Socrate's ideas. Plato established an "Academy", named after the god Academus, which can be considered the first university in western society and which remained in existence for 900 years.

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was, for twenty years, a student and then a teacher in Plato's Academy. Besides being a great philosopher, he was also a scientist who studied biology and physics. Aristotle was the first philosopher to write full-length works on ethics: *The Nicomachean Ethics* and *The Eudemian Ethics*.

There were many other early Greek philosophers, but none matched the contributions of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. One of these, Thrasymachus, was a contemporary of Socrates. He introduced the philosophy of Relativism as an acceptable moral position, a position that is still held in some philosophical circles today.

## **Educational Objectives**

On completing this lesson on the Ancient Greeks and Moral Values students will:

- Recognize the importance of having moral standards to guide their choices and actions as students, sports participants, and future leaders.
- Recognize that the lessons and examples of ancient times are equally valid today.
- Understand the need to think before choosing to act, rather than reacting from anger or another emotion.

## **Core Subject Areas and Grade Level**

Social Studies, World History, 9<sup>th</sup> grade

## **Objectives from Competency-Based Curriculum**

- Identify/Describe people and events of time periods in history
- Cite examples that illustrate the influence of people and ideas during a selected time period (e.g. Ancient Greece in the period 600-300 BC).

## **Core Values Emphasized in this Learning Module**

- Honesty – cheating on an exam, presenting someone else’s work or an internet article as your own, are not actions of an honest person.
- Integrity - having good moral character should prevent students from plagiarizing the work of others; plagiarism is self-defeating because it prevents the person from demonstrating what he or she can achieve by hard work.
- Respect - persons must honor the hard work of others, especially their teachers in the case of students, as well as the just expectations others, which parents have for their children.
- Responsibility - persons must recognize the necessity for accepting responsibility for all their actions and decisions in order to develop strong character traits.
- Pursuit of excellence - in order to achieve worthwhile goals in life and come to deserve the respect of others, it is necessary to recognize that hard work and constant dedication to those goals are required for success.

## Key Concepts and Vocabulary

- An unexamined life is not worth living (Socrates).
- The End does not justify the Means, i.e. a person cannot employ a bad means to achieve a good end.
- Cheating of any kind destroys one's integrity.
- Integrity requires taking responsibility for all your actions.

## Vocabulary

- **Unexamined life** – to live without having goals or purpose for achieving personal growth.
- **Golden Mean** - living a moral life means avoiding the extremes of doing too much or too little, and choosing rather to do what is between these extremes.
- **Relativism** - the moral position that says that each individual is free to choose to act according to what he/she thinks is good and right for them to choose without having any regard for what others believe to be moral.

## Suggested Time for Instruction

The total time for this component should be at least two and preferably three classes.

## Background for Teachers

1. Socrates (469-399 BC), the first of the great Greek philosophers, believed that an **unexamined life, a life without goals or purpose, was not worth living**. He walked the streets of Athens questioning the citizens about their ideas concerning life, its purpose, and what these citizens thought was important for living a good life. Young people often gathered around Socrates and were amused when he questioned prominent Athenians who found it difficult to respond to Socrates' questions.

A person who lives without goals or purpose is like a boat drifting with the current without anyone steering it. To live without goals or purpose is to live without thinking or planning ahead. Indeed Aristotle ((384-322-BC) expressed a similar thought in his belief **that an unplanned life is not worth examining, for an unplanned life is one where we do not know what we are trying to achieve.**

This leads to a discussion of **ends and means**.

Having a goal, a purpose, is to have an **end**, a target that we want to achieve. How we are to go about achieving that end is the **means**. Here are some examples of good ends to have:

A. You seek to acquire a new car; the means you will employ is to work hard and save your money. To work for a new car is a good end but you cannot achieve it by stealing that car—that would be unacceptable. The principle here is:

**the end (good) does not justify using a bad means,  
that is, you cannot steal or cheat to achieve your good end.**

B. A higher end or goal would be your desire to graduate with good grades so that you can go to college. Your means can only be hard work and commitment to your studies. Cheating on exams or assignments would not be acceptable means for achieving your end, for this would be demonstrating a lack of respect for your own abilities which will remain unchallenged, as well as a lack of respect for your teacher and for your parents' expectations of you.

Another key notion: **The life goals or ends that are most worthy and uplifting are those that are the most difficult but lead to the greater achievement when acquired.** For example, seeking to become a lawyer or a good teacher is more difficult and a higher goal than a more easily attained goal of acquiring a new car.

2. Plato (427-384 BC) defined the human soul as having three levels or parts: **Rational, Spirited and Appetite**. These levels correspond to the three engines of the body: **mind (reason), heart (emotion), and stomach (desire)**. Plato uses the image of a charioteer who has the task of having to control his two horses: the charioteer is the mind or reason which must control the horses (emotion and desire) who are seeking to go in different directions. When we follow the direction our reason tells us is the correct course to follow, we will not be led astray by our emotions or desires. Reason will lead us to act responsibly, to do what we know is right, rather than be led by feelings that can have us go against what we know is right.
3. Aristotle (384-322 BC), a student of Plato who became a teacher in Plato's Academy, believed that to live a good moral life, a life of "virtue" as he called it, one had to act according to the "**Golden Mean**". By this he meant that we should follow the middle road between excess and defect, that is, between going too far (excess) in our actions or by not doing enough (defect). Here are examples:

<u>Excess (vice)</u>	<u>Golden Mean (virtue)</u>	<u>Defect (vice)</u>
Foolhardy	Courage	Cowardice
Gluttony	Moderation	Starvation
Exaggeration	Honesty	Untruthful
Wasteful	Generosity	Stingy
Boastful	Modesty	Very shy

To have knowledge of what is right will lead us to live a life of virtue by observing the Golden Mean; to do otherwise is to live a life that demonstrates ignorance of what responsible and knowledgeable persons ought to do.

4. Thrasymachus, a contemporary of Socrates is recognized for his statement that “**might makes right**”, a position known as **Relativism**. It means that there are no standards for determining right and wrong, that each individual can decide what is okay for him to act. For example, politicians can do whatever they wish in order to keep their office; a powerful developer can buy favors that will allow him to obtain zoning changes he wants; a car salesman can hide the defects of a vehicle in order to make a sale to someone less knowledgeable of vehicles. **If Relativism was a ruling moral standard in society, chaos would exist in a community where order would be impossible when everyone was following what he or she judged was right for them without regard for any moral standards.**

### **Description of Classroom Activities**

Classroom discussion and activities will focus on the positions of the four philosophers cited above. To aid discussion, students should be given time to think about the questions and to jot down their ideas before the discussions begin.

#### **Activity #1. Ends and Means: Just What Can be Justified?**

Review the basic points of the philosophy of Socrates (Refer to main text of module.). Lead a classroom discussion based upon the following scenario:

A person wants to have a newer car because their present car is in need of repairs. In order to pay for a newer car, the person must sell the present one. In order to sell the present car at a good price, the person cannot reveal to potential buyer that the car has need of repairs. If the sale depends on not revealing the need for repairs, is this using a wrong means to achieve a good end (the sale of the older car)?

Ask students to write a short position paper on the issue of plagiarism. Is plagiarism, copying someone else’s paper, or presenting an internet article as your own, ever justified? Can we agree that plagiarism shows a lack of respect for one’s own ability?

#### **Activity #2: Personal responsibility: Think Before You Leap**

With students review Plato’s definition of the human soul. Then ask the students to imagine a charioteer with two horses pulling his two-wheel chariot. Does Plato’s example of the charioteer ring true, with our reason having to control our emotions and desires? Is this not the bottom line to exercising personal responsibility for all our actions?

Ask students to list five examples of when they might have acted out of anger. After thinking carefully about what they did, have them decide how they would have acted differently if they had used reason first. Ask them to describe their “reasoned” responses in a second column.

#### **Activity # 3. Relativism: Classroom Discussion**

Compare the philosophies of Aristotle and Thrasymachus. Then ask the students to consider if a community can have order if everyone is allowed to follow his own view of what is right and wrong without regard to standards of behavior common in society? Ask students to discuss what moral standards exist in their community. Summarize y suggesting that each individual must choose how he/she is going act. Ask students if they are free to choose to act in a way that is contrary to what are the moral standards accepted by society?

#### **4. Case Study**

This case can be given to the students as a handout so that they have a clear idea of all the details.

Ask the students to write a short essay stating what they believe the professor should do and why.

A university professor has had a star player on the football team as a student in his math class. Mildly stated, the student is mathematically challenged in spite of the professor having spent numerous hours giving him extra tutoring.

Now the big game of the season is approaching in which this star player is being counted on to lead the team to a win against their big rival. If the team wins, they will be chosen to play in a major bowl game. Furthermore, the team has a very dedicated following among the alumni of the university who will be most disappointed if their team loses the big game—a loss that will likely result in their disappointment being demonstrated by a decrease in alumni contributions.

The problem is that this star player earned far below a passing grade in his final math exam and, if it is recorded, will make him ineligible to play in the game. His professor knows if he awards the grade the student has earned he will be ineligible to play. The result will be that the team will probably lose their big game, the alumni and, probably other faculty members, as well as the administration dependent on alumni support, will be displeased and blame the professor for not allowing the student a passing grade in light of his importance. Furthermore, the professor, who is not tenured, could be risking the loss of his job at the university. What should the professor do? Explain your reasons.

#### **Extension Activity: A Letter for Analysis (for Honor Students)**

(This letter appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* dated November 15, 1999):

Subject: MORAL INSTRUCTION IS NOT INDOCTRINATION

...The infusion of morality into public-school classrooms is not a new practice, and, more significantly, it has not always been advocated by those motivated by religious conviction.

Famed University of Chicago educator Mortimer Adler, educator, spent the 1930s and 1940s railing against the prevalent teaching style of the time, which he believed lacked moral certainty. He feared that relativism-embracing teachers of the day were creating a generation of students with wish-washy moral fiber. He believed absolute moral standards were needed to be returned to the classroom, and that students needed to be taught these absolute standards.

His message is instructive today. I teach an ethics class in a secular boarding school in upstate New York and am consistently shocked at my students' inability to condemn obviously horrific behavior. Adler turns in his grave, I am sure, when my students defend slavery, female genital mutilation and other atrocities that are occurring in the world today with the argument: "Well, it's just the way their culture works." We do not need religion in our classrooms to teach our children to recognize right from wrong. But we cannot be afraid to tell them that some things are never acceptable.

If we continue to fear that moral instruction in any form in classrooms is simply a guise for religious indoctrination, we will surely continue to produce morally hollow graduates. As Adler wrote, "When men no longer have confidence that right decisions . . . matters can be rationally arrived at . . . the institutions of democracy are the walls of an empty house which will collapse under the pressure from without because of the vacuum within."

*New Lebanon, NY*

Discuss with students whether or not moral issues need to be included as a fundamental part of school curriculums.

## Helpful Bibliography and Web Resources

### Bibliography

Donald Palmer. *Looking at Philosophy: The Unbearable Heaviness of Philosophy Made Lighter*. California; Mayfield Publishing. 3rd ed, 2000. Has many humorous cartoons illustrating the Ancient Greek philosophers' ideas.

Mortimer J. Adler. *Aristotle for Everybody*. NY: Touchstone, 1978.

### Web Resources

On Socrates "unexamined life" with interesting comparisons to Buddhism:  
<http://bystander.homestead.com/unexamined.html>

Top 5 quotes of Socrates:  
[www.quotedb.com/quotes/1563](http://www.quotedb.com/quotes/1563)

For a good image of Plato's charioteer:  
[www.wutsamada.com/alma/ancient/chariot.htm](http://www.wutsamada.com/alma/ancient/chariot.htm)

For several good examples of Aristotle's "Golden Mean":  
[www.fred.net/tzaka/arismean.html](http://www.fred.net/tzaka/arismean.html)