

Why did Socrates despise the Sophists?

During the times of ancient Greece, the spread of knowledge and ideas were happening at a rapid pace. There were many people who spent their entire lives just contemplating life and the world around them. These thinkers had strong opinions on topics such as politics, history, culture, and such. Many of these thinkers were called philosophers and their ideas are still being talked about in recent times. Another type of people who spread knowledge were called the sophists. They were a very controversial group of people and can still be seen as problematic today. This may be due to the fact that they were heavily critiqued by some major people, including Socrates. The sophists were teachers who mainly taught debate and philosophy who were largely foreigners. They usually taught young, wealthy people as they charged fees for their classes.¹ Socrates was a prominent philosopher in ancient Athens. His teachings were very influential and continue to be analyzed and studied today. It was a well-known fact that Socrates disliked the sophists and he was known for constantly criticizing them. By comparing his teachings and ideas to the sophists, it can be concluded that Socrates despised the sophists because they were not actually knowledgeable or philosophical people. This can be seen through the fact that they charge fees for their teachings, were more subjective, taught opinion, and were known to be seeking praise.

One of the main reasons that Socrates hated the sophists was the fact that they accepted fees from their students. By accepting money shows that the sophists were greedy and did not actually care about the spread of knowledge. To Socrates, by accepting money, the sophists depraved honesty, which means that the truth that they were selling is corrupt.² The sophists' truth can be seen as corrupt because it is influenced by money and greed. When one is trying to

¹ Wolfgang Koerner, "Sophists and Socrates," (Lecture, Ottawa, September 16, 2019).

² Wolfgang Koerner, "Sophists and Socrates," (Lecture, Ottawa, September 16, 2019).

charge money for truth, the truth becomes distorted because they are influenced by the money they are receiving. Socrates believed that everyone had knowledge and that it was cultivated as the person grew up.³ This would mean that the sophists were keeping knowledge from the youth that would not be willing to pay for their teachings. As one gets older, they are said to get wiser but with the sophists, they would not be as willing to share their wisdom unless they were given a fee. Socrates claims that he himself did not know anything or had particular answers but he did know that he did not know anything and that is what set him apart from the sophists.⁴ If one believes that they already possess knowledge, then there is no point in thinking. In this case, the sophists can be seen as deceitful because they are trying to sell “knowledge” or an absolute truth, even though there is no such thing.

Another reason Socrates despised the sophists was that they did not have real knowledge as they were mainly teaching persuasion. The sophists were known to teach the method of rhetoric, which Socrates did not like. During ancient Greek times, rhetoric was taught to be able to persuade someone using techniques in writing or speaking.⁵ The sophists made a business out of teaching people to be persuasive rather than teaching them actual truths. This can also be seen as deceitful because with rhetoric, honesty may not matter, it is all about being able to convince people. In contrast, Socrates taught dialectic, which could be another reason for him further disliking the sophists method of rhetoric. In general, dialectic is about finding the truth of opinion. Socratic dialectic was a method of arguing and questioning a belief or statement to

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Philip A. Pecorino, "The Sophists," Queensborough Community College, Queensborough Community College, 2000, http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/SocialSciences/ppecorino/INTRO_TEXT/Chapter%20%20GREEKS/Sophists.htm.

figure out assumptions and other related ideas.⁶ When comparing dialectic to rhetoric, it is easy to see why Socrates disapproved the sophists. Dialectic is more about finding the truth and properly analyzing a statement or an idea, not just simply trying to convey a statement in a persuasive manner. People learning dialectic will know how to find truth in their ideas and to test it with others. Rhetoric does not examine what is written or spoken like with dialectic, it only teaches people to be more convincing when stating their ideas. This could mean that what is written or spoken may not be significant or meaningful but would still be able to have an impact.

The contrasting views of truth and knowledge can be seen as a reason Socrates despised the sophists too. The sophists did not believe in eternal or universal truths.⁷ As seen with their emphasis on rhetoric, they did not care about discovering what the truth was. Rather, they mainly cared about basic knowledge and persuasion. Truth was a topic Socrates was passionate about. Throughout his life, Socrates looked for eternal truth. He himself did not have a definite statement on truth or knowledge but he did spend a lot of time contemplating these subjects.⁸ Since Socrates put great importance on analyzing the notions of truth and knowledge, it is easy to see why he disliked the sophists because of this. The sophists did not care for truth, only the act of persuasion, which would mean that the ideas that was spread through methods of rhetoric in speaking and writing could have the possibility of being inconsistent and not as thought out as with dialectic. There was no genuine reasoning in the ideas they would convey through rhetoric since they only had to focus on persuasion. This could be seen as another reason Socrates hated

⁶ Philip A. Pecorino, "The Sophists," Queensborough Community College, Queensborough Community College, 2000, http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/SocialSciences/ppecorino/INTRO_TEXT/Chapter%20%20GREEKS/Sophists.htm.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Wolfgang Koerner, "Sophists and Socrates," (Lecture, Ottawa, September 16, 2019).

them. He cared a lot about the notions of knowledge and truth but the sophists disregarded that. It adds to the idea of the lack of real knowledge and truth of the sophists. It also further proves that they were deceitful, as Socrates viewed them.

There are many other different reasons that can also explain why Socrates despised the sophists. Firstly, the sophists can be seen as seeking praise and recognition rather than truth and knowledge. The sophists tended to have high rates for their lessons. Therefore, only wealthy people would have been able to afford their classes.⁹ By doing this the sophists would be known amongst the wealthy, gaining status and power. In contrast, Socrates never charged for his lessons and did not care about gaining status. He only focused on intellectual thought as well as seeking knowledge and truth.¹⁰ Secondly, the sophists were largely foreigners coming from places like northern Greece.¹¹ Socrates highly valued the idea of citizenship and loyalty to one's city. He even chose execution over exile for this reason.¹² Since sophists left their city of origin to teach and seek recognition in another city, Socrates may have disliked them for it as he was very loyal to his own city. Thirdly, it can be inferred that the sophists supported democracy because they taught in Athenian institutions and approved of the society.¹³ On the other hand, Socrates was not a fan of democracy, and actually preferred more of an aristocracy, like his student Plato. Socrates also believed in the idea of a philosopher king, as Plato did, who would be the ruler instead of a democratic society.¹⁴ Since Socrates and Plato criticized democracy and

⁹ Wolfgang Koerner, "Sophists and Socrates," (Lecture, Ottawa, September 16, 2019).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Wolfgang Koerner, "Introduction to the Origins of Political Thought," (Lecture, Ottawa, September 9, 2019).

¹³ Wolfgang Koerner, "Sophists and Socrates," (Lecture, Ottawa, September 16, 2019).

¹⁴ Wolfgang Koerner, "Plato: Republic," (Lecture, Ottawa, September 26, 2019).

preferred more of an aristocracy, Socrates could have disliked the sophists for supporting democracy.

The sophists were highly criticized by Socrates and this was evident in the way they viewed ideas such as knowledge and truth. The fees charged by the sophists were another reason as well as the teaching of rhetoric and many other reasons. In conclusion, by analyzing the teachings of Socrates to the Sophists it can be concluded that Socrates despised the sophists because they were not actual philosophers and people of thought.