

Notes on Socrates

I. Sophists

- a. Sophist from the Greek word “sophos”, meaning wise. Philosophy means “love of wisdom”, cf: “Sophie” as the name of the novel’s protagonist
- b. Were *skeptics*: believed man cannot know the truth about the riddles of nature and of the universe
- c. When asked about the existence of the Gods Protagora, a sophist, said, “The question is compoex and life is short.” This is known as *agnosticism*.
- d. Agnostic from the Greek “gnosis”, meaning knowledge

II. Socrates 470--399 BC

- a. Lived in Athens; ugly, potbellied, dressed in rags and wore no shoes. Rarely drank, but when he did, he could out drink everyone without showing signs of drunkenness.
- b. Instead of preaching his views as the sophists did, Socrates would question all people professing knowledge until contradictions in their beliefs became evident.
- c. Often feigned complete ignorance, asked people to explain unstable ideas; this gave birth to the phrase “Socratic irony”. This method of inquiry became standard for philosophical arguments for the next several thousand years.
- d. Concerned with ethical matters, executed for corrupting youth of Athens, could have defended himself but chose to die rather than take back his beliefs
- e. Socrates known primarily through the writings of Plato, Xenophon, and on of Aristophanes’ plays, *The Clouds*. We are left to speculate on the accuracy of their portraits.