

Document-Based Assessment

Politics and Philosophy in Ancient Greece

Philosophy flourished under Athenian democracy. In their search for the best form of government, the best leaders, and the perfect society, Greek philosophers created works that have influenced thinkers for ages. These “lovers of wisdom” used reason to guide their quest for truth, as the documents below show.

Document A

“[Justice] is not a matter of external behavior, but of the inward self and of attending to all that is, in the fullest sense, a man’s proper concern. The just man does not allow the several elements in his soul to usurp one another’s functions; he is indeed one who sets his house in order, by self-mastery and discipline coming to be at peace with himself, and bringing into tune those . . . parts. . . . Only when he has linked these parts together in well-tempered harmony . . . will he be ready to go about whatever he may have to do, whether it be making money . . . or business transactions, or the affairs of state. In all these fields when he speaks of just and honorable conduct, he will mean the behavior that helps to produce and to preserve this habit of mind; and by wisdom he will mean the knowledge which presides over such conduct. Any action which tends to break down this habit will be for him unjust; and the notions governing it he will call ignorance and folly.

That is perfectly true, Socrates.

Good, said I. I believe we should not be thought altogether mistaken, if we claimed to have discovered the just man and the just state, and wherein their justice consists.”

—Plato’s *Republic*, quoting Socrates

Document B

“The legislator should always include the middle class in his government; if he makes laws oligarchical, to the middle class let him look; if he makes them democratical, he should equally by his laws try to attach this class to the state. There only can the government ever be stable where the middle class exceeds one or both of the others, and in that case there will be no fear that the rich will unite with the poor against the rulers. . . . There comes a time when out of a false good there arises a true evil, since the encroachments of the rich are more destructive to the constitution than those of the people.”

—*Politics*, Aristotle

Document C

“[F]or the truth is that you can have a well-governed society only if you can discover for your future rulers a better way of life than being in office; then only will power be in the hands of men who are rich, not in gold, but in the wealth that brings happiness, a good and wise life. All goes wrong when, starved for lack of anything good in their own lives, men turn to public affairs hoping to snatch from thence the happiness they hunger for. They set about fighting for power and this internecine [mutually destructive] conflict ruins them and their country. The life of true philosophy is the only one that looks down upon offices of state; and access to power must be confined to men who are not in-love with it.”

—*Republic*, Plato



▲ Plato and Aristotle in a detail from the sixteenth century “School of Athens” fresco by Raphael

Analyzing Documents

Use your knowledge of Greek philosophy and Documents A, B, and C to answer the questions below.

1. According to Socrates (Document A), a just state depends on
 - A scientific truth and reason.
 - B the harmony and discipline of the individual.
 - C the stability of the elected government.
 - D wisdom, education, and wealth.
2. According to Plato (Document C), which group of people would make the best rulers?
 - A artists
 - B rich aristocrats
 - C philosophers
 - D soldiers
3. According to Aristotle (Document B), why is the middle class necessary for a stable government?
 - A to give rich people allies
 - B to offer hope to poor people
 - C to contribute a reasonable tax base
 - D to balance the rich and the poor
4. **Writing Task** Greek philosophers held a deep interest in politics. What does this reflect about Greek society? Base your response on these documents and information provided in the chapter.

Sources from the Past

Socrates' View of Death

In one of his earliest dialogues, the Apology, Plato offered an account of Socrates' defense of himself during his trial before a jury of Athenian citizens. After the jury had convicted him and condemned him to death, Socrates reflected on the nature of death and reemphasized his commitment to virtue rather than to wealth or fame.

And if we reflect in another way we shall see that we may well hope that death is a good thing. For the state of death is one of two things: either the dead man wholly ceases to be and loses all sensation; or, according to the common belief, it is a change and a migration of the soul unto another place. And if death is the absence of all sensation, like the sleep of one whose slumbers are unbroken by any dreams, it will be a wonderful gain. For if a man had to select that night in which he slept so soundly that he did not even see any dreams, and had to compare with it all the other nights and days of his life, and then had to say how many days and nights in his life he had slept better and more pleasantly than this night, I think that a private person, nay, even the great king of Persia himself, would find them easy to count, compared with the others. If that is the nature of death, I for one count it a gain. For then it appears that eternity is nothing more than a single night.

But if death is a journey to another place, and the common belief be true, that all who have died dwell there, what good could be greater than this, my judges? Would a journey not be worth taking if at the end of it, in the other world, we should be released from the self-styled judges of this world, and should find the true judges who are said to sit in judgment below? . . . It would be an infinite happiness to converse with them, and to live with them, and to examine them. Assuredly there they do not put men to death for doing that. For besides the other ways in which they are happier than we are, they are immortal, at least if the common belief be true.

SOURCE: F. J. Church, trans. *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, 2nd ed. London: Macmillan, 1886, pp. 76–78. (Translation slightly modified.)

And you too, judges, must face death with a good courage, and believe this as a truth, that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life, or after death. His fortunes are not neglected by the gods, and what has come to me today has not come by chance. I am persuaded that it is better for me to die now, and to be released from trouble. . . . And so I am hardly angry with my accusers, or with those who have condemned me to die. Yet it was not with this mind that they accused me and condemned me, but rather they meant to do me an injury. Only to that extent do I find fault with them.

Yet I have one request to make of them. When my sons grow up, visit them with punishment, my friends, and vex them in the same way that I have vexed you if they seem to you to care for riches or for anything other than virtue: and if they think that they are something when they are nothing at all, reproach them as I have reproached you for not caring for what they should and for thinking that they are great men when in fact they are worthless. And if you will do this, I myself and my sons will have received our deserts at your hands.

But now the time has come, and we must go hence: I to die, and you to live. Whether life or death is better is known to God, and to God only.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

How does Socrates' understanding of personal morality and its rewards compare and contrast with the Zoroastrian, Buddhist, and Hindu views discussed in earlier chapters?

world—indeed, it was not the world of genuine reality, but only a pale and imperfect reflection of the world of Forms or Ideas. Displays of virtue or other qualities in the world imperfectly reflected the ideal qualities. Only by entering the world of Forms or Ideas was it possible to understand the true nature of virtue and other qualities. The secrets of that world were available only to philosophers—those who applied their rational faculties to the pursuit of wisdom.