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Socrates and the search for truth

I would like to tell you a brief story based on true events:

Socrates was a man who lived in Ancient Greece a long time ago. He fought in the Peloponnesian wars and was decorated for his bravery. Later in life, he decided to take a good, long look at himself and resolved to examine his life in great detail in order to try to answer the following questions: 'What kind of person should I be? And what kind of life should I live?' He thought that philosophy would be the best way to answer his questions, and from then on, he spent most of his time in the Athenian marketplace talking to people about these very issues. He was trying to find out the truthful answers to the questions he had asked himself.

He noticed that there was a group of philosophers called Sophists who were already employed by certain Athenians to teach them philosophy. Now, Socrates was reasonably well-off and so he wasn't interested in receiving any money from those he talked with about philosophy, but he noticed something strange about the Sophists that caused him to be very concerned.

On one day, a Sophist would teach one of their clients that one thing was true, but the very next day, they would teach another client that exactly the opposite was true. They were also able to provide their clients with reasons in support of their opposite conclusions. The topics Socrates saw the Sophists doing this with were the following: whether the Earth is flat or round; whether '1 + 1 = 2' is true or not; whether their client's wife was beautiful or not; and whether cannibalism is acceptable or not!

Socrates was very worried about this.

'You can't teach them that they are *both* right,' said Socrates to Protagoras, one of the most famous Sophists, 'surely, one of them has to be wrong!'

'It depends on your point of view,' said Protagoras. 'After all, as I often say: *man is the measure of all things!*'

'But, as philosophers, as lovers of wisdom, we must be interested, above all else, in *the truth,*' said Socrates. 'We must try to discover what *the truth is* about, for instance, whether the Earth is flat or round, or whether 1 + 1 = 2, or whether it is right to eat other humans or not!'

'The only measure of truth is us, because, as I often say, *man is the measure of all things,*' replied Protagoras, 'so, what's true for you *is true for you*, but what's true for another *is true for them*. As I said before, *man is the measure of all things*. That'll be a gold piece, please, for my wisdom!' said Protagoras with his hand held out while he looked in another direction for someone else to sell his wisdom to. Socrates looked at his hand and said, 'it is not true *for me* that you have imparted any wisdom, so I shall not pay!' and he walked off leaving Protagoras fuming with anger.

- Who do you agree with?
- Who is the relativist here and who is the absolutist?
- Does truth matter?

Meet a philosopher: Socrates (469 – 399 BCE)

Socrates never wrote anything down but is, nevertheless, one of the most famous philosophers of all. His pupil, Plato wrote down most of what we know about him after he died. He famously said, 'The unexamined life is not worth living?' What do you think this could possibly mean? Read the story for a clue.