TRADITION OF SEARCHING

Philosophy – Lesson 2 - The Natural Philosophers and the Sophists

DIOCESE OF KERRY
POST PRIMARY RESOURCES

1. Lesson Overview

Subject	Religious Education / The Tradition of Searching
Topic	Philosophy – The Natural Philosophers and the Sophists
Suggested level	Senior Cycle / adaptable for Junior Cycle
Suggested duration	60 minutes per lesson; suitable for two lessons if discussion is extended
Learning focus	Natural Philosophers, rational versus mythical explanations, origins, permanence and change, the Sophists, rhetoric, truth, justice and relativism.
PowerPoint sequence	Natural Philosophers → theories → categories of philosophy → Sophists → teaching and students → truth and justice → Thrasymachus → Protagoras → 'Man is the measure of all things' → exam question

Learning Intentions

- Understand who the Natural Philosophers were and why they sought rational explanations of reality.
- Identify the theories associated with Thales, Anaximenes and Heraclitus.
- Explore permanence and change through Parmenides and Heraclitus.
- Recall metaphysics, logic, ethics, anthropology and epistemology.
- Explain who the Sophists were, what they taught and why their skills were valued in Athens.
- Explore Sophist ideas about truth, justice, power and individual perspective.
- Explain 'Justice is simply the interest of the stronger' and 'Man is the measure of all things'.
- Develop discussion, reasoning, comparison and argument skills.

Success Criteria

- I can describe the Natural Philosophers and what they were trying to discover.
- I can identify the theories of Thales, Anaximenes and Heraclitus.
- I can explain permanence and change using an everyday example.
- I can explain who the Sophists were and why they were valued in Athens.
- I can explain the Sophist understanding of truth and justice.
- I can explain at least one key Sophist quotation and give a reasoned response.

Key Vocabulary

Term	Meaning
Natural Philosophers	Greek thinkers of the 5th and 6th centuries BCE seeking rational rather than mythical understandings of reality.
Rational	Based on reason and logical thought.
Mythical	Based on traditional myths or stories rather than rational investigation.
Sophists	Thinkers who taught skills including rhetoric and debate.
Rhetoric	The art of persuasion and debate.
Relativism	The view presented in the PowerPoint that truth or what is right may vary according to the person or situation.
Metaphysics	Study of being and the universe.
Logic	Study of reason.
Ethics	Study of moral behaviour.
Anthropology	Study of human nature.
Epistemology	Study of knowledge.

2. Suggested Lesson Sequence

Stage / Time	Teacher & Student Activity	Resources
Starter – Recall and Wonder (5 mins)	Ask: What were the Natural Philosophers trying to understand? Display: Why are we here? Where did we come from? How were we created?	PowerPoint
Teacher Input – Natural Philosophers (8 mins)	Explain the movement from mythical to rational understandings of reality and introduce the 5th/6th centuries BCE.	PowerPoint
Activity 1 – Who Said What? (10 mins)	Match Thales, Anaximenes and Heraclitus with water, air and fire; justify the theories.	Worksheet 1
Permanence and Change (8 mins)	Introduce Parmenides and Heraclitus. Ask students for everyday examples of something changing while remaining the same.	PowerPoint + discussion
Teacher Input – Sophists (8–10 mins)	Introduce their teaching, Athens, education, rhetoric and debate.	PowerPoint
Activity 2 – Sophist Debate (10 mins)	Students argue both sides of a statement, including a position that may not be their personal view.	Worksheet 2
Activity 3 – Truth, Justice and Power (10 mins)	Unpack Thrasymachus and Protagoras through Think–Pair–Share.	Worksheet 3
Plenary / Exit Ticket (5 mins)	Compare Natural Philosophers and Sophists and identify one question to investigate further.	Exit ticket

3. Classroom Activity 1 – The Natural Philosophers

Name: _____ Class_____

Part A – Match the philosopher to the theory

Philosopher	Theory	Why might this idea make sense?
Thales		
Anaximenes		
Heraclitus		

Choices: Everything came from water • Everything came from air • Everything came from fire

Part B – Think like a Natural Philosopher

My choice:

My reason:

My evidence/observation:

A question that could challenge my theory:

4. Classroom Activity 2 – The Sophist Debate

1. Form groups of four. Two students argue FOR the statement and two argue AGAINST it.
2. Each side prepares three reasons.
3. Argue the assigned position even if it is not your personal view.
4. Afterwards decide which argument was most persuasive and explain why.
5. Discuss: Is winning an argument the same as discovering the truth?

Choose one statement:

☐ School uniforms should be compulsory.

☐ Social media does more good than harm.

☐ Everyone should have the same amount of freedom.

☐ Rules are only fair when everyone agrees with them.

☐ Being able to persuade people is more important than being right.

Planning Our Argument

Group Names

Write in the statement

Are you arguing for or against – circle which one you are arguing.

FOR	AGAINST

Our argument	Notes
Reason 1	
Reason 2	
Reason 3	

Reflection: Did you believe the position you argued? _____ Did that matter? Why?

5. Classroom Activity 3 – Truth, Justice and Power

Quotation 1

'Justice is simply the interest of the stronger.'

• What could 'the stronger' mean? Who might have power in a society?
• Give one example of a rule or law that could be described as serving the interests of those in power.
• Is something just because it is made into a law? Explain.

Quotation 2

'Man is the measure of all things.'

• What do you think Protagoras meant?
• Could two people have different ideas about what is true or right?
• What effect could this idea have on how people behave?
• Does this mean there is no universal truth or right and wrong? Explain.

6. Reading Comprehension – Natural Philosophers and Sophists



Philosophy means 'the love of wisdom'. The Natural Philosophers were people from Greece in the 5th and 6th centuries BCE who began to develop a rational understanding of reality rather than a mythical understanding. They were interested in big questions: Why are we here? Where did we come from? How were we created?

Different Natural Philosophers offered different theories. Thales believed everything came from water. Anaximenes believed everything came from air. Heraclitus believed everything came from fire. Parmenides and Heraclitus were also interested in permanence and change: how things can change and yet remain the same.

Another group of thinkers emerged in Greece: the Sophists. They taught grammar, literature, rhetoric, statesmanship and generalship. Athens was developing as an educated democracy and needed educated citizens. The Sophists became popular with young people, especially those with ambitions for political careers. They charged for their services, so wealthy families were generally more able to employ them.

Rhetoric, the art of persuasion and debate, was particularly important. The Sophists taught students to debate equally, regardless of their own personal viewpoint. The PowerPoint explains that for the Sophist it did not matter who was right or wrong; what mattered was who could win the debate. This created controversy because of the belief that nothing was completely right and nothing was completely wrong.

The Sophists also questioned truth and justice. They believed these could be concepts invented by people in power to suit their own interests. Thrasymachus stated: 'Justice is simply the interest of the stronger.' Protagoras concluded that absolute truth could not be known and that truth was a matter for each individual. His famous statement, 'Man is the measure of all things', is linked to the idea that what is true for one person may not be true for another.

The ideas of the Sophists raised important questions about truth, justice, power and morality. They also developed students' abilities to argue, debate and persuade.

Questions

1. Who were the Natural Philosophers?

2. What kind of understanding of reality did they seek?

3. What three questions are identified as concerns of the Natural Philosophers?

4. Match Thales, Anaximenes and Heraclitus with water, air and fire.

5. What questions about permanence and change interested Parmenides and Heraclitus?

6. Name three subjects taught by the Sophists.

7. Why were the Sophists useful in developing Athens?

8. What is rhetoric?

9. Why did the Sophists become controversial?

10. Explain Thrasymachus' statement about justice.

11. What did Protagoras believe about absolute truth?

12. In your own words, explain 'Man is the measure of all things'.

7. Teacher Answer Key

Activity 1

- Thales – water; Anaximenes – air; Heraclitus – fire.
- Accept justified responses to the reasoning questions.

Activity 2

- Accept any well-reasoned arguments. The key point is practising an assigned position rather than simply stating a personal opinion.
- Discuss the difference between persuasion and truth.

Activity 3

- 'The stronger' can refer to those with power or influence. The PowerPoint presents justice as potentially reflecting their interests.
- Protagoras is presented as arguing that absolute truth cannot be known and that truth is a matter for each individual. Accept reasoned evaluation.

Reading Comprehension

6. Greek thinkers of the 5th and 6th centuries BCE seeking rational rather than mythical understandings of reality.
7. A rational understanding of reality.
8. Why are we here? Where did we come from? How were we created?
9. Thales – water; Anaximenes – air; Heraclitus – fire.
10. How things can change and yet remain the same.
11. Any three: grammar, literature, rhetoric, statesmanship, generalship.
12. Athens was developing as an educated democracy and needed educated citizens.
13. The art of persuasion and debate.
14. Their emphasis on winning debates and the view that nothing was completely right or wrong caused controversy.
15. It presents justice as serving the interests of those who are stronger or in power.
16. Absolute truth could not be known and truth was a matter for each individual.
17. An answer should explain that what is true for one person may not be true for another, as presented in the PowerPoint.

8. Exit Ticket

1. One thing I learned about the Natural Philosophers is

2. One thing I learned about the Sophists is

3. 'Justice is simply the interest of the stronger' means

4. One question I still have about truth or justice is

9. Homework / Exam Preparation

PowerPoint classwork: Write a paragraph on the Natural Philosophers, mentioning at least one Natural Philosopher.

Suggested structure:

Introduce the Natural Philosophers.
Explain their rational rather than mythical approach.
Name one Natural Philosopher.
Explain his theory.
Conclude with the importance of their questions.

Exam-style extension – 2019 Higher Level Question 1(a):

Imagine the Sophists of Ancient Greece were advertising courses in philosophy. Based on your knowledge of the Sophists outline what you think they would say about philosophy and the purpose it serves in the lives of people. (40 marks)

10. Teacher Notes

- Use Think–Pair–Share repeatedly, reflecting the questioning style of the PowerPoint.
- Students do not need to agree with Protagoras or Thrasymachus; the objective is to understand and evaluate the ideas.
- Distinguish between describing a philosophical position and agreeing with it.
- Use the five categories of philosophy as retrieval practice from the previous lesson.