

**Free Speech in Ancient Athens**  
November 14 2014

This session will be divided into four parts.

**I – Class Discussion (15 minutes):** Are there universal human rights and is freedom of speech one of them?

Getting ready for class discussion: Read and *think* about each of the following passages and the questions appended to them.

“We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights... YOU KNOW THE REST”

Where do rights such as free speech come from and how do we know? Do the rights depend on belief in a “Creator”?

[Declaration of Universal Human Rights](#) (Passed by UN General Assembly in 1948) **PREAMBLE**

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, ...”

What's the basis for human rights in this document? Is this a better formulation of the right to things such as free speech than that in the US Declaration of Independence? Would such a statement be ratified today? What if it failed to win ratification? Would the rights disappear? What validates the claim of universal human rights?

**US Constitution, Amendment One**

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Does this say that freedom of speech is a right? Does it apply to all citizens, all residents? Free and slave? Illegal immigrant? Is freedom of speech a matter of law or is it a cultural value affirmed in certain social and cultural circumstances?:

**II – Class Discussion (10 minutes):** Are there ways of thinking about freedom of speech that do not involve a concept of universal human rights? Can free speech be sustained if it is not viewed as a universal human right? If so, what validates freedom of speech?

How did the Greeks think about it?

Background: The Greek term for “freedom of speech” is parrhesia (ΠΑΡΡΗΣΙΑ), a compound of a word for everything (pan) and one root for speech (rhe) plus a noun-former at the end -sia).

Talk about parrhesia seems to emerge about the same time as Athenian democracy (fifth century BCE) and to be modelled in Athenian drama (comedy and tragedy), where shocking things are sometimes said, about traditional ideas, other citizens, sexual behavior etc.

It was “claimed by the Athenians as their privilege,” Liddell, Scott & Jones’ Greek Lexicon (LSJ) says,. A *privilege*? Not a right? LSJ cites various passages including a scene in Euripides Hippolytus where Phaedra, Hippolytus’ stepmother, who has fallen in love with him is contemplating suicide:

that I may not be detected bringing shame to my husband or to the children I gave birth to but rather that they may live in glorious Athens as free men, free of speech (parrhesia) and flourishing, enjoying good repute where their mother is concerned.

Lines 420 -- 424, trans. D. Kovacs.; The whole opening of the play is relevant to our purposes and may be read on the Perseus site on the web.

Is this just patriotic blather or do the lines have some relevance in a tragedy that shows an Olympian divinity, the sex goddess Aphrodite, destroying a distinguished Athenian family?

Were the Athenians really serious about freedom of speech? What happened when it ran up against traditional ideas, for example about the gods? Let’s try to imagine such a situation.

**III – The Trial (30 minutes):** The challenge is for each group in this simulation to draw upon what has already been learned in this class about Greek speech making, and so come up with speeches that are consistent with what we know about ancient Greece, its values, and the type of arguments in use during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.

*Class members will split into their four groups. The first three should communicate before class, work out a way to divide responsibilities, agree on a position, arguments and a spokesperson who will present the speech in class. [Group Four is on deck in class 11/12, and so gets the slightly easier task here]*

You have already encountered many of the texts that can help you come up with a convincing speech. In addition to that it may be helpful if individual members of the group draw on one or another of the texts mentioned below, not as “assignments” but as resources to help make your presentation more compelling. ( Texts are available on line via the [Perseus Project](#).)

**Group One: The Intellectual:** This group should agree on and put together and present a speech (5 – 7 minutes) by an “intellectual”, probably a poet, arguing that belief in and worship of the Olympian gods is foolish and pernicious.

Resources: (Divide up responsibility for assimilating this material and applying it to the Intellectual’s speech.

[Xenophanes of Colophon](#):

‘Homer and Hesiod have ascribed unto the Gods all that is reproach and blame in the world of men, stealing and adultery and deceit.’

[Hesiod Theogony](#) 150-89 (Kronos castrates his father) (Text and Translation at the Perseus site

[Aristophanes Clouds](#) 221- 274 (A rascal encounter the atheist Socrates)

Euripides beginning of [Hippolytus](#) (see above)

Each of these texts is highly critical of conventional Greek religion. The challenge is to weave them together into a coherent and plausible case.

**Group Two: The Prosecution:** This group should agree on and put together and present a speech (5 - 7 minutes) demanding that the intellectual be punished for impiety. (Impiety (asebeia) is not well defined in Attic law so you have some latitude here.

Resources:

Background: Thucydides 6. 27 – 29: In 415 BCE someone smashed images of Hermes in the city; and some group parodied the Eleusinian Mysteries.

Lysias VI “Against Andocides for Impiety”

**Group Three: The Consultant / speech writer (logographos).** This group should agree on and present a speech (5 - 7 minutes) defending the intellectual, *without deriving arguments from any principle of universal human rights*.

Resources:

Plato’s [Apology](#)

[Andocides I On the Mysteries](#)

The Administrator of the Oath: (One person from Group Three; two minutes). After consult [Demosthenes Against Timocrates \(Speech XXIV\) sec. 148—151](#), administer the “Heliastic” oath to the Jury. [You may shorten the oath but be sure to include the sanction.]

**Group Four:** You are The Jury: After taking [an oath](#) (careful about that!), discuss for 5 minutes the alleged crime and its implications, the speeches, and the arguments behind them and then **vote** – Guilty or Not Guilty. (The punishment is decided in a separate vote).

Recap: Can you justify your presentation or vote on the basis of what you have learned about ancient Athens?

**IV – Wrap up discussion (10 minutes).** The Big Question: What's the relationship between free speech and religion?

One starting point for thought on this question: All Greek tragedy and all Greek comedy was first produced at a religious festival, the [City Dionysia](#) in Athens. That is, the performances were part of a carnival.

Have you ever been to Mardi Gras?

What can [Dionysus](#) (a.k.a. Bacchus) do for, or to you?

Why would the Athenian state fund and support such a festival?

**Not assigned but worth thinking about:**

Can freedom of speech be disassociated from rhetoric? Michel Foucault thought so. The Wikipedia article on Foucault is a good starting place to start thinking about his understanding of parrhesia.

Is the concept of parrhesia compatible with Christianity? May Christians speak frankly to one another and to their God? The word is fairly common in the New Testament, including Ephesians 3.12, 1 Timothy 3.13, Hebrews 10.35; First epistle of John 3.21. These uses reflect ideas in the Hebrew scriptures, e.g. Job 27.10. Does it help to think of the church as an ekklesia, "assembly," the same word used for a meeting of the Athenian citizenry?

How did freedom emerge in human history: Kurt Raaflaub The Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece (2003). From the jacket: Although there is constant conflict over its meanings and limits, political freedom itself is considered a fundamental and universal value throughout the modern world. For most of human history, however, this was not the case. In this book, Kurt Raaflaub asks the essential question: when, why, and under what circumstances did the concept of freedom originate?

Can free speech coexist with the "Guardian State"? See David Brooks op-ed of May 20, 2014 "[The Big Debate](#)".

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**If you believe understanding the roots of freedom, human rights, etc. is an important part of a real liberal education, think about how you might help. For one model see: [Frank Bruni "Plato and the Promise of College"](#)**

If you want to carry on the conversation I'm [wrconnor1@gmail.com](mailto:wrconnor1@gmail.com) and on Facebook as Walter Robert Connor.

Have fun! XAIPETE