

Socratic Dialogue between a Philosopher and an Architect

- Philosopher: There are no words to thank you properly for all your work in helping me set up my library. I couldn't have done it without you.
- Architect: My pleasure. And I must say you have quite an impressive collection indeed. However, if you allow me a slight criticism, I find there are too many books on Philosophy in it as compared with other disciplines.
- Philosopher: Well, my friend, as far as I'm concerned Philosophy is the foundation of all our knowledge and science. Without it, we wouldn't have architecture, and so you'd be out of a job.
- Architect: That's a surprising assertion! And I beg to differ: Architecture has nothing to do with Philosophy. It is based solidly on a foundation of modern science.
- Philosopher: You're right, of course. Though I'm not sure how solid is that foundation. What you call "modern science" would not exist without Philosophy.
- Architect: What a preposterous statement! What on earth do you mean?
- Philosopher: To wit: What the moderns call "science" is founded on two schools of philosophy: Empiricism and Positivism. All builders today (both engineers and architects) use principles of mathematics and physics formulated by the first empiricist thinkers that redefined "science" as compared to what it used to mean. And these thinkers insisted that all their data were merely hypothetical and theoretical, not proven with certainty –a very unstable foundation to build upon indeed.
- Architect: My friend, your ignorance is abysmal! Are you saying that there was no architecture prior to the 17th century? What about those marvelous monuments of the Middle Ages, such as the gothic cathedrals? And the architectural masterpieces of the Ancient world?...the Parthenon?...the pyramids of Egypt?
- Philosopher: All based on Philosophy. The architects of the Parthenon –Iktinos and Kallikratis, and their overseer, Pheidias– followed the ideas of stability, harmony, balance and beauty, derived from the great philosophers of their times, such as –for example– Pythagoras. And in turn these thinkers were inspired by the esoteric knowledge of the Egyptian masons and builders of the famous pyramids and other magnificent temples which are still standing today –a good example being the magnificent temple of Hatshepsut, a tomb built in the 15th century B.C., under the supervision of Queen Hatshepsut's chancellor and royal architect Senemut.

Architect: This is utter nonsense. I admit that those ancient buildings predate modern science, but the ancients obviously used scientific principles of mathematics and engineering which, though crude and primitive, were based on sound observations of the behavior of previous constructions and whether they stood or collapsed. They knew that stones were stronger than wood as building materials, that they are less subject to wear and tear, and are not flammable. This knowledge has nothing to do with what you call “philosophy”.

Philosopher: I suppose then that, according to you, geometry was never a factor in ancient architecture.

Architect: Of course it was. What’s that got to do with philosophy?

Philosopher: I’m referring to Euclidian geometry, used by ancient architects, but which is based on axioms and forms considered absolute and abstract, such as were Plato’s “ideas” (εἶδος) –perhaps Euclid’s source for his discipline. Therefore, an equilateral triangle is eternally the same without change, because the εἶδος of “triangle” is immutable, as are all axioms and corollaries of his geometry.

Architect: So what? Today’s architects use more advanced and accurate geometries based on advanced mathematics that can improve the durability and stability of their buildings. And in these improvements, they wisely use the principles and laws of modern science, without which their buildings would collapse.

Philosophy: I see... And I suppose that no buildings collapse nowadays.

Architect: Some do, of course, but that’s because the builders did not use modern scientific methods or good materials.

Philosopher: My contention is that, had the moderns used the science of the ancient builders, and the philosophies they were founded on, their buildings would be as everlasting as the pyramids.

Architect: Well, my friend, let’s agree to disagree.

Philosopher: That’s logical. By the way, Logic is another product of Philosophy. But that’s grist for another day’s dialectical mill.