

Confusing Words Series
Theosophist and Theosopher



The meaning of suffixes -er / -or

Describes the action of a person who customarily, but not professionally, does something. It is normally added to verbal roots, *e.g.*, a drummer *drums*, a ringer *rings bells*, a smoker *smokes*, a climber *climbs*, a singer *sings*, a teacher *teaches*, an advisor *advises*, a philosopher *philosophises*.

In Ancient Greece, *philosopher* was commonly rendered as one who loves wisdom, who speculates on truth and reality, who reduces the principles of philosophy to practice, who lives according to the rules of wisdom in everyday life. By analogy, then, *theosopher* is a thinker who, by reflecting upon the eternal verities, works to realise celestial ideals here on earth.

The meaning of suffix -ist

Denotes a person in a well-defined profession or occupation, *e.g.*, dentist, cardiologist, pianist; also, -ist indicates an adherent of a political party or religious doctrine, *e.g.*, nationalist, elitist, fundamentalist.

Philosophy is commonly understood to mean “love of wisdom.” *Philosophism*, however, is faulty or fallacious philosophy that comes from *sophistry*, *i.e.* the development of an argument intended to deceive or mislead. Hence, orthodox philosophers never called themselves philosophists and even today’s salaried thinkers are known as philosophers. Pythagoras allowed himself to be called philosopher-φιλόσοφος but never wise-σοφός. Etymologically speaking, theo-sophist is an expert in, as well as a practitioner of, theosophy: -sophist here has been coined as a suffix to theos or god. Sophist-σοφιστής proper, on the other hand, comes from sophistry-σοφιστεία,¹ an intentionally fallacious reasoning, a false philosophy, the antonym of sophia-wisdom, in fact. Although originally sophist was a master of one’s own craft, an adept, an expert, a wise, a prudent and statesman-like individual (in which the Seven Sages are called *σοφισταί*), its meaning progressively changed from practitioner of true wisdom to practitioner of false wisdom. In modern English, sophist, (*i.e.*, Shakespeare’s sophister), sophistic, and sophistical are all linked with sophistry-σοφιστεία.

¹ Cf. derivatives of σοφισ(-τεία), *i.e.*, -τέον, -τεύω, -τεύμα, -τήριον, -τής, -τικός, -τιάω, -τικός.