

Socrates The History Channel

Viewed by many as the founding figure of Western philosophy, Socrates (469-399 B.C.) is at once the most exemplary and the strangest of the Greek philosophers. He grew up during the golden age of Pericles' Athens, served with distinction as a soldier, but became best known as a questioner of everything and everyone. His style of teaching—immortalized as the Socratic method—involved not conveying knowledge, but rather asking question after clarifying question until his students arrived at their own understanding.

Socrates wrote nothing himself, so all that is known about him is filtered through the writings of a few contemporaries and followers, most notably his student Plato. Socrates was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens and sentenced to death. Choosing not to flee, he spent his final days in the company of his friends before drinking the executioner's cup of poisonous hemlock

Socrates - The Early Years

Socrates was born and lived nearly his entire life in Athens. His father Sophroniscus was a stonemason and his mother, Phaenarete, was a midwife. As a youth, he showed an appetite for learning. Plato describes him eagerly acquiring the writings of the leading contemporary philosopher Anaxagoras and says he was taught rhetoric by Aspasia, the talented mistress of the great Athenian leader Pericles.

Did you know? Although he never outright rejected the standard Athenian view of religion, Socrates' beliefs were nonconformist. He often referred to God rather than the gods, and reported being guided by an inner divine voice.

His family apparently had the moderate wealth required to launch Socrates' career as a hoplite (foot soldier). As an infantryman, Socrates showed great physical endurance and courage, rescuing the future Athenian leader Alcibiades during the siege of Potidaea in 432 B.C.

Through the 420s, Socrates was deployed for several battles in the Peloponnesian War, but also spent enough time in Athens to become known and beloved by the city's youth. In 423 he was introduced to the broader public as a caricature in Aristophanes' play "Clouds," which depicted him as an unkempt buffoon whose philosophy amounted to teaching rhetorical tricks for getting out of debt.

Philosophy of Socrates

Although many of Aristophanes' criticisms seem unfair, Socrates cut a strange figure in Athens, going about barefoot, long-haired and unwashed in a society with incredibly refined standards of beauty. It didn't help that he was by all accounts physically ugly, with an upturned nose and bulging eyes.

Despite his intellect and connections, he rejected the sort of fame and power that Athenians were expected to strive for. His lifestyle—and eventually his death—embodied his spirit of questioning every assumption about virtue, wisdom and the good life.

Two of his younger students, the historian Xenophon and the philosopher Plato, recorded the most significant accounts of Socrates' life and philosophy. For both, the Socrates that appears bears the mark of the writer. Thus, Xenophon's Socrates is more straightforward, willing to offer advice rather than simply asking more questions. In Plato's later works, Socrates speaks with what seem to be largely Plato's ideas.

In the earliest of Plato's "Dialogues"—considered by historians to be the most accurate portrayal—Socrates rarely reveals any opinions of his own as he brilliantly helps his interlocutors dissect their thoughts and motives in Socratic dialogue, a form of literature in which two or more characters (in this case, one of them Socrates) discuss moral and philosophical issues.

One of the greatest paradoxes that Socrates helped his students explore was whether weakness of will—doing wrong when you genuinely knew what was right—ever truly existed. He seemed to think otherwise: people only did wrong when at the moment the perceived benefits seemed to outweigh the costs.

Thus the development of personal ethics is a matter of mastering what he called “the art of measurement,” correcting the distortions that skew one’s analyses of benefit and cost.

Socrates was also deeply interested in understanding the limits of human knowledge. When he was told that the Oracle at Delphi had declared that he was the wisest man in Athens, Socrates balked until he realized that, although he knew nothing, he was (unlike his fellow citizens) keenly aware of his own ignorance.

Trial and Death of Socrates

Socrates avoided political involvement where he could and counted friends on all sides of the fierce power struggles following the end of the Peloponnesian War. In 406 B.C. his name was drawn to serve in Athens’ assembly, or *ekklesia*, one of the three branches of ancient Greek democracy known as *demokratia*.

Socrates became the lone opponent of an illegal proposal to try a group of Athens’ top generals for failing to recover their dead from a battle against Sparta (the generals were executed once Socrates’ assembly service ended). Three years later, when a tyrannical Athenian government ordered Socrates to participate in the arrest and execution of Leon of Salamis, he refused—an act of civil disobedience that Martin Luther King Jr. would cite in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

The tyrants were forced from power before they could punish Socrates, but in 399 he was indicted for failing to honor the Athenian gods and for corrupting the young. Although some historians suggest that there may have been political machinations behind the trial, he was condemned on the basis of his thought and teaching. In his “The Apology of Socrates,” Plato recounts him mounting a spirited defense of his virtue before the jury but calmly accepting their verdict. It was in court that Socrates allegedly uttered the now-famous phrase, “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

His execution was delayed for 30 days due to a religious festival, during which the philosopher’s distraught friends tried unsuccessfully to convince him to escape from Athens. On his last day, Plato says, he “appeared both happy in manner and words as he died nobly and without fear.” He drank the cup of brewed hemlock his executioner handed him, walked around until his legs grew numb and then lay down, surrounded by his friends, and waited for the poison to reach his heart.

The Socratic Legacy

Socrates is unique among the great philosophers in that he is portrayed and remembered as a quasi-saint or religious figure. Indeed, nearly every school of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, from the Sceptics to the Stoics to the Cynics, desired to claim him as one of their own (only the Epicurians dismissed him, calling him “the Athenian buffoon”).

Since all that is known of his philosophy is based on the writing of others, the Socratic problem, or Socratic question—reconstructing the philosopher’s beliefs in full and exploring any contradictions in second-hand accounts of them—remains an open question facing scholars today.

Socrates and his followers expanded the purpose of philosophy from trying to understand the outside world to trying to tease apart one’s inner values. His passion for definitions and hair-splitting questions inspired the development of formal logic and systematic ethics from the time of Aristotle through the Renaissance and into the modern era.

Moreover, Socrates’ life became an exemplar of the difficulty and the importance of living (and if necessary dying) according to one’s well-examined beliefs. In his 1791 autobiography Benjamin Franklin reduced this notion to a single line: “Humility: Imitate Jesus and Socrates.”