

## Socrates

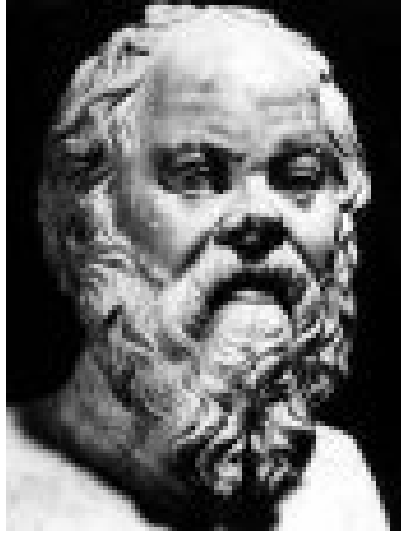
### **5th Century B.C. Genius**

Socrates lived in Athens from 469 to 399 B.C. A philosopher and teacher, Socrates set the standards for all subsequent Western philosophy.

Although he was well known during his own time for his conversational skills and public teaching, Socrates wrote nothing, so we are dependent upon his students (especially Xenophon and Plato) for any detailed knowledge of his methods and results. The trouble is that Plato was himself a philosopher who often injected his own theories into the dialogues he presented to the world as discussions between Socrates and other famous figures of the day. Nevertheless, it is usually assumed that at least the early dialogues of Plato provide a (fairly) accurate representation of Socrates himself.

Socrates devised the art of questioning, and he demonstrated not only how to free ourselves and each other from complacent popular beliefs, but how almost any human being may wield wits and perception to discover much about himself, about his community and about his world.

Socrates believed in the superiority of argument over writing and therefore spent the greater part of his mature life in the marketplace and public places of Athens, engaging in dialogue and argument with anyone who would listen or who would submit to interrogation. Socrates was reportedly unattractive in appearance and short of stature but was also extremely



hardy and self-controlled. He enjoyed life immensely and achieved social popularity because of his ready wit and a keen sense of humor that was completely devoid of satire or cynicism.

Socrates' contribution to philosophy was essentially ethical in character. Belief in a purely objective understanding of such concepts as justice, love, and virtue, and the self-knowledge that he

inculcated, were the basis of his teachings. He believed that all vice is the result of ignorance, and that no person is willingly bad; correspondingly, virtue is knowledge, and those who know the right will act rightly. His logic placed particular emphasis on rational argument and the quest for general definitions, as evidenced in the writings of his younger contemporary and pupil, Plato, and of Plato's pupil, Aristotle.

Although a patriot and a man of deep religious conviction, Socrates was nonetheless regarded with suspicion by many of his contemporaries, who disliked his attitude toward the Athenian state and the established religion. He was charged in 399 B.C. with neglecting the gods of the state, introducing new divinities, a reference to the mystical inner voice, to which Socrates often referred, and corrupting young people.

Plato, as reported in his [Apologhma](#) (*Apology*), gives the substance of the defense made by Socrates at his trial; a bold vindication of his whole life, and provides us with many reminders of the

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central features of Socrates' approach to philosophy and its relation to practical life.

**Ironic Modesty:** Explaining his mission as a philosopher, Socrates reports an oracular message telling him that "No one is wiser than you." (*Apology*) He then proceeds through a series of ironic descriptions of his efforts to disprove the oracle by conversing with notable Athenians who must surely be wiser. In each case, however, Socrates concludes that he has a kind of wisdom that each of them lacks: namely, an open awareness of his own ignorance.

**Questioning Habit:** The goal of Socratic interrogation is to help individuals achieve genuine self-knowledge, even if it often turns out to be negative in character.

**Devotion to Truth:** Even after he had been convicted by the jury, Socrates declined to abandon his pursuit of the truth in all matters. Refusing to accept exile from Athens or a commitment to silence as his penalty, he maintains that public discussion of the great issues of life and virtue is a necessary part of any valuable human life. "The unexamined life is not worth living." (*Apology*) Socrates would rather die than give up philosophy, and the jury seems happy to grant him that wish.

**Dispassionate Reason:** Even when the jury has sentenced him to death, Socrates calmly delivers his final public words, a speculation about what the future holds. Disclaiming any certainty about the fate of a human being after death, he nevertheless expresses a continued confidence in the power of reason, which he has exhibited (while the jury has not). Who really wins will remain unclear.

He was condemned to die, although the vote was carried by only a small majority. When, according to Athenian legal practice, Socrates made an ironic counterproposition to the court's death sentence, proposing

only to pay a small fine because of his value to the state as a man with a philosophic mission, the jury was so angered by this offer that it voted by an increased majority for the death penalty.

Socrates' friends planned his escape from prison, but he preferred to comply with the law and die for his cause. His last day was spent with his friends and admirers, and in the evening he calmly fulfilled his sentence by drinking a cup of hemlock according to a customary procedure of execution.

Through Socrates, we learned to search our own perceptions and our own awareness, rather than our opinions and stock of old, error-prone, second-hand knowledge. The Socratic Method is now understood to be the very best approach to teaching and learning, and most of the techniques of Project Renaissance are rooted in Socratic Method.

"The use of Socratic methods, even when they clearly result in a rational victory, may not produce genuine conviction in those to whom they are applied. "

### Resources:

<http://www.winwenger.com/socrates.htm>

<http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/phil/philo/philosophy/socrates.html>

<http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/2d.htm>

[http://www.curriculumunits.com/galileo/trials/Socrates/right\\_bio\\_socrates.htm](http://www.curriculumunits.com/galileo/trials/Socrates/right_bio_socrates.htm)

