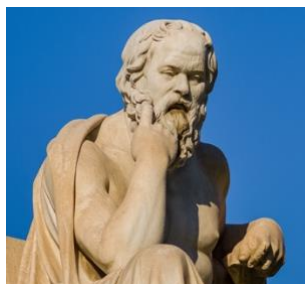


## Socrates

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**Socrates** (c. 469 BC–399 BC) was a Classical Greek philosopher. Credited as one of the founders of Western philosophy, he is an enigmatic figure known most comprehensive accounts of Socrates to survive from antiquity.

Through his portrayal in Plato's dialogues, Socrates has become renowned for his contribution to the field of ethics, and it is this Platonic Socrates who also lends his name to the concepts of Socratic irony and the Socratic method, or *elenchus*. The latter remains a commonly used tool in a wide range of discussions, and is a type of pedagogy in which a series of questions are asked not only to draw individual answers, but to encourage fundamental insight into the issue at hand. **For more on the Socratic Method, see the accompanying document.** It is Plato's Socrates that also made important and lasting contributions to the fields of epistemology and logic, and the influence of his ideas and approach remains strong in providing a foundation for much western philosophy that followed.

It is unclear how Socrates earned a living. Ancient texts seem to indicate that Socrates did not work. In Xenophon's *Symposium*, Socrates is reported as saying he devotes himself only to what he regards as the most important art or occupation: discussing philosophy. In *The Clouds* Aristophanes portrays Socrates as accepting payment for teaching and running a sophist school with Chaerephon, while in Plato's *Apology* and *Symposium* and in Xenophon's accounts, Socrates explicitly denies accepting payment for teaching. More specifically, in the *Apology* Socrates cites his poverty as proof he is not a teacher.

Several of Plato's dialogues refer to Socrates' military service. Socrates says he served in the Athenian army during three campaigns: at Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium. In the *Symposium* Alcibiades describes Socrates' valor in the battles of Potidaea and Delium, recounting how Socrates saved his life in the former battle (219e-221b). Socrates' exceptional service at Delium is also mentioned in the *Laches* by the General after whom the dialogue is named (181b). In the *Apology*, *Socrates compares his military service to his courtroom troubles (discussed below), and says anyone on the jury who thinks he ought to retreat from philosophy must also think soldiers should retreat when it looks like they will be killed in battle.*

### Trial & Death

Socrates lived during the time of the transition from the height of the Athenian hegemony to its decline with the defeat by Sparta and its allies in the Peloponnesian War. At a time when Athens sought to stabilize and recover from its humiliating defeat, the Athenian public may have been entertaining doubts about democracy as an efficient form of government. Socrates appears to have been a critic of democracy, and some scholars interpret his trial as an expression of political infighting.

Despite claiming loyalty to his city, Socrates clashed with the current course of Athenian politics and society. He praises Sparta, archrival to Athens, directly and indirectly in various dialogues. But perhaps

the most historically accurate of Socrates' offenses to the city was his position as a social and moral critic. Rather than upholding a status quo and accepting the development of immorality within his region, Socrates worked to undermine the collective notion of "might makes right" so common to Greece during this period. Plato refers to Socrates as the "gadfly" of the state (as the gadfly stings the horse into action, so Socrates stung Athens), insofar as he irritated the establishment with considerations of justice and the pursuit of goodness. His attempts to improve the Athenians' sense of justice may have been the source of his execution.

According to Plato's *Apology*, Socrates' life as the "gadfly" of Athens began when his friend Chaerephon asked the oracle at Delphi if anyone was wiser than Socrates; the Oracle responded that none was wiser. Socrates believed that what the Oracle had said was a paradox, because he believed he possessed no wisdom whatsoever. He proceeded to test the riddle through approaching men who were considered to be wise by the people of Athens, such as statesmen, poets, and artisans, in order to refute the pronouncement of the Oracle. But questioning them, Socrates came to the conclusion that, while each man thought he knew a great deal and was very wise, they in fact knew very little and were not really wise at all. Socrates realized that the Oracle was correct, in that while so-called wise men thought themselves wise and yet were not, he himself knew he was not wise at all which, paradoxically, made him the wiser one since he was the only person aware of his own ignorance. Socrates' paradoxical wisdom made the prominent Athenians he publicly questioned look foolish, turning them against him and leading to accusations of wrongdoing. Socrates defended his role as a gadfly until the end: at his trial, when Socrates was asked to propose his own punishment, he suggests a wage paid by the government and free dinners for the rest of his life instead, to finance the time he spends as Athens' benefactor.<sup>[14]</sup> He was, nevertheless, found guilty of corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens and sentenced to death by drinking a mixture containing poison hemlock.

Xenophon and Plato agree that Socrates had an opportunity to escape, as his followers were able to bribe the prison guards. He chose to stay for several reasons:

1. He believed such a flight would indicate a fear of death, which he believed no true philosopher has.
2. If he fled Athens his teaching would fare no better in another country as he would continue questioning all he met and undoubtedly incur their displeasure.
3. Having knowingly agreed to live under the city's laws, he implicitly subjected himself to the possibility of being accused of crimes by its citizens and judged guilty by its jury. To do otherwise would have caused him to break his "social contract" with the state, and so harm the state, an act contrary to Socratic principle.

### **Socrates on Knowledge\***

Socrates often said his wisdom was limited to an awareness of his own ignorance. Socrates is quoted as having said "**I know that I know nothing**" (Ancient Greek: ἐν οἶδα ὅτι οὐδὲν οἶδα *hen oída hoti oudén oída*; Latin: *scio me nihil scire* or *scio me nescire*). The preferred saying, as recorded in much literature, is "The only real wisdom is knowing you know nothing".

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\* Wikipedia contributors. "I know that I know nothing." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 19 Feb. 2010. Web. 25 Apr. 2010.