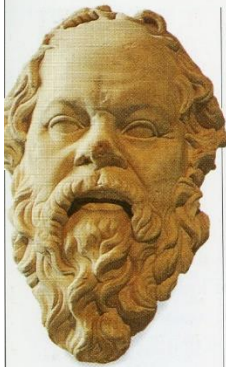


## Socrates



**CENTRE OF ATTRACTION**  
Socrates was far from handsome. All the descriptions and images we have of him portray him as snub-nosed and pug-faced. But he possessed great irony and humour. He also had a powerful personal charisma. People who were themselves of the highest ability were attracted to him, and formed a brilliant circle with him at its centre.



**THE OMPHALOS STONE**  
Delphi was regarded as the centre of the world. The Greeks placed a huge stone there to be, as they put it, the world's navel – and then revered it as a holy object.

## SOCRATES THE MASTERLY INTERROGATOR

*Socrates was in effect the founder of moral philosophy. He also established the method of trying to get at truth by persistent questioning.*

**SOCRATES WAS THE FIRST** great Greek philosopher to be Athenian by birth, and he lived in what has been called that city's golden age. He was born around 470 BC and died in 399 BC, leaving behind him a wife and three children. As a young man, he studied the then-fashionable philosophies of what are now called the "pre-Socratic philosophers", which in their different ways were trying to understand the natural world around us. Two things above all impressed him about them, both of which he thought were to their disadvantage.

The first was that they were at odds with one another. They were a welter of conflicting theories. And there seemed to be no satisfactory way of deciding between them. They propounded exciting ideas about the world, but without much apparent regard for critical method; so it was impossible to tell which of them, if any, was true. But his second objection was that it would make little practical



**THE TEMPLE AT DELPHI**  
*The oracle at Delphi was generally regarded as the ultimate source of wisdom about the true nature of things.*

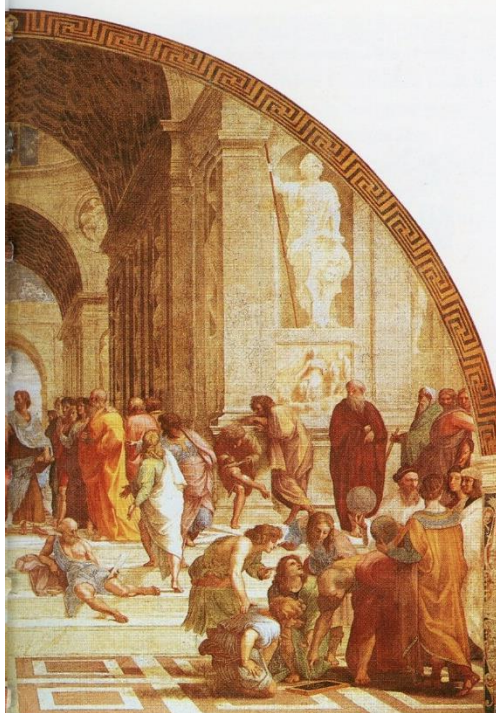


**THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS**  
*This magnificent fresco in the Vatican, painted by Raphael during the years 1508–11, portrays the most famous thinkers of ancient Greece. At the very centre, side by side, stand Plato and Aristotle. Plato on the left, Aristotle on the right. To the left of them Socrates is addressing a group of bystanders.*

difference, anyway, even if we could discover which of them were true. What effect did it have on our actual lives to know how far the sun was from the earth, or whether it was the size of the Peloponnese or bigger than the whole world? Our behaviour could in no way be affected by such knowledge. What we needed to know was how to conduct our lives and ourselves. For us, the urgent questions were more like: What is good? What is right? What is just? If we knew the answers to those questions it would have a profound effect on the way we lived.

Socrates did not think he knew the answers to these questions. But he saw that no-one else knew them either. When the oracle at Delphi declared him to be the wisest of men, he thought this could mean only that he alone knew that he did not know anything. There was no such thing at that time as securely based knowledge of the natural world, and not much knowledge about the world of human affairs either.





So he went around Athens raising the basic questions of morality and politics with anyone who would listen to him. Such was the interest of the discussions he raised – and he was obviously a charismatic personality as well – that people gathered round him wherever he went, especially the eager young. His procedure was always the same. He would take some concept that was fundamental to our lives and ask, “What is friendship?”, or “What is courage?”, or “What is religious piety?” He would challenge a person who thought he knew the answer, and then subject that answer to examination by asking the person a series of searching questions about it. For instance, if the person claimed that courage was essentially the capacity to endure, Socrates might say, “But what about obstinacy, then? Obstinate people can show extraordinary persistence, and therefore endurance. Is that courage? Is it even admirable?” And so the other person would be driven to retract his answer, or at least qualify it. Under interrogation it always emerged that the original answer was defective. This showed that although that interlocutor – and what is more the bystanders – had thought they knew what, let us say, “courage” was, actually they did not.

This Socratic questioning became famous. And it killed two birds with one stone. It exposed the ignorance of people who thought they knew – but who in fact, as the Delphic oracle had told Socrates, knew no more than he did. And it aroused in the bystanders an interest in a fundamental philosophical question, and got them launched on a discussion of it. Although Socrates seldom came up with any final answers himself (and in any case it would have been part of his method to insist that any such answer should itself be probed and questioned, and therefore could not be relied on to be “final”), he stimulated an excited interest in the problems he raised, and made people appreciate more fully than they had before the difficulties involved in trying to solve them.

#### WHAT LIES BEHIND THE WORDS?

When Socrates asked a question like “What is justice?” he was not asking for a mere verbal definition. The fact that we apply the word “just” to all sorts of different people, decisions, laws, and sets of arrangements meant, he believed, that there was something common to them, a common property called “justice” which they all shared; and it was the character of this common property that he was trying to uncover. In other words, he believed that something exists called “justice”, and that its existence is real, although



#### ANCIENT AND REVERED

By the time this mural painting of Socrates was made in a Roman villa during the 1st century AD, he had become a cultural hero in intellectual circles of the Roman Empire.



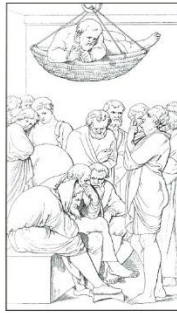
**MAN OF THE PEOPLE**  
New portraits of Socrates continue to be made to this day. This picture of him walking through the streets of Athens dates from 1897.

*“If you will  
take my advice,  
you will think  
little of Socrates,  
and a great  
deal more of  
truth”*

SOCRATES

**CARELESS OF FAME**  
Socrates took no steps to ensure the survival of his own work or name. Socrates never, so far as we know, wrote anything down. All the knowledge we have of him comes from other people. The chief of these is his pupil Plato, who wrote an immortal series of dialogues with Socrates as the main speaker. In Plato's early dialogues, at least, we get the views of the historical Socrates. Later, Plato begins putting his own views into Socrates' mouth.





#### SOCRATES INTERROGATED

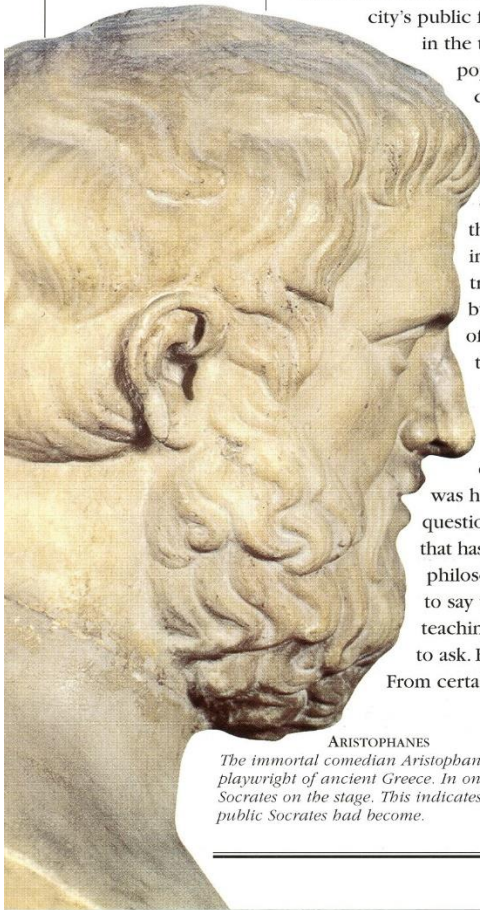
In a scene from the play *The Clouds* (423 BC) by the comic dramatist Aristophanes (c. 448–380 BC), who satirized issues such as the new learning of Socrates, Socrates is shown suspended in a basket over peoples' heads. He is being questioned by Strepsiades, another character in the play.

not material, perhaps some sort of essence; and that he was trying to discover the nature of this abstract reality. This view of his was to be developed in the work of his disciple Plato into a belief in abstract Ideas as the perfect and permanent forms of all the entities and characteristics to be found in this imperfect and impermanent world of our daily lives.

## “WHAT IS JUSTICE?”

SOCRATES

The very nature of what Socrates did made him a disruptive and subversive influence. He was teaching people to question everything, and he was exposing the ignorance of individuals in power and authority. He became a highly controversial figure, much loved but also much hated. At one of the city's public festivals he was caricatured in the theatre in front of the whole



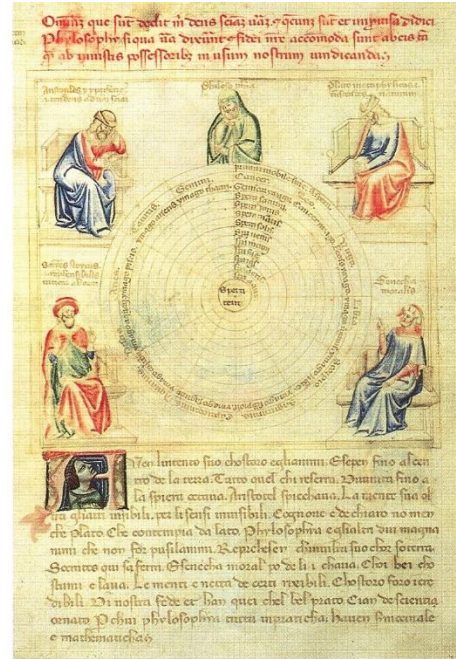
#### ARISTOPHANES

The immortal comedian Aristophanes was the greatest comic playwright of ancient Greece. In one of his plays he caricatured Socrates on the stage. This indicates how well known to the public Socrates had become.

population of Athens by the comic dramatist Aristophanes, in a play called *The Clouds* (423 BC). In the end, the authorities arrested him on charges of corrupting the young, and of not believing in the gods of the city. He was tried, and condemned to die by poison. The detailed story of his trial and death is one of the most inspiring tragedies in the history of human thought.

What has made Socrates in some ways the best known of all philosophers is that it was he who began the relentless questioning of our basic concepts that has been characteristic of philosophy ever since. He used to say that he had no positive teachings to offer, only questions to ask. But this was disingenuous.

From certain lines of questioning to



#### FOUR GREAT PHILOSOPHERS

This medieval Italian manuscript shows the four philosophers most revered by the time of the Renaissance: Aristotle (top left), Plato (top right), Seneca (bottom right), and Socrates (bottom left).

which he continually reverts, it becomes clear that there are certain cherished beliefs that underlie much of what he says.

One is that to a man who preserves his integrity no real, long-term harm can ever come. The uncertainties of this world are such that it can happen to anybody that he is stripped of all his possessions and thrown into prison unjustly, or crippled by accident or disease; but these are chance happenings in a fleeting existence that is going to end soon anyway. Provided your soul remains untouched, your misfortunes will be comparatively trivial. Real personal catastrophe consists in corruption of the soul. That is why it does a person far, far less harm to suffer injustice than to commit it. We should pity the perpetrator of injustice, not the victim of injustice.

This belief of Socrates made him a hero to the Stoics, who hundreds of years later turned him into a sort of secular patron saint. Another basic belief of Socrates was that no-one really knowingly does wrong. His point here was that if you really do in the fullest sense understand that it is wrong to do something, then you do not do it. Conversely, if you



do do it, this shows that you have not properly grasped, deep down, that it is wrong. This view has the consequence that virtue becomes a matter of knowledge. This conviction on Socrates' part provided a great deal of the drive behind his tireless pursuit of questions like "What is justice?": he believed that if only we knew the answer to that question we would be bound to behave justly. In such cases, the pursuit of knowledge and an aspiration to virtue are one and the same thing.

#### BE TRUE TO YOURSELF

It is doubtful whether any philosopher has had more influence than Socrates. He was the first to teach the priority of personal integrity in terms of a person's duty to himself, and not to the gods, or the law, or any other authorities. This has had incalculable influence down the ages. Not only was he willing to die at the hands of the law rather than give up saying what he believed to be right, he actually chose to do so, when he could have escaped had he wished. It is a priority that has been reasserted by some of the greatest minds since – minds not necessarily under his influence. Jesus said: "What

will a man gain by winning the whole world, at the cost of his true self?" And Shakespeare said: "This above all: to thine own self be true."

In addition to this, Socrates did more than any other individual to establish the principle that everything must be open to question – there can be no cut and dried answers, because answers, like everything else, are themselves open to question. Following on from this, he established at the centre of philosophy a method known as dialectic, the method of seeking truth by a process of question and answer. It has remained there ever since, and is used particularly as a teaching method – which is after all what Socrates himself used it for. It is not equally appropriate for all forms of teaching – it is not, for example, a good way of imparting pure information – but as a way of getting people to re-examine what they think they already know, it is incomparable. To be most effective it calls for a sympathetic personal relationship between teacher and pupil, one in which the teacher truly understands the pupil's difficulties and prompts him step by step in the right direction. This is often still called "Socratic method".

#### USING THE NAME

*Socrates has given his name to the archetypal notion of a wise and dominant figure outside the realm of politics. If we say of a person "He is the Socrates of present-day Paris" everyone knows what we are meaning. We do not use the name of any other philosopher like this.*



THE DEATH OF SOCRATES

This famous painting by the French artist David, completed in 1787, shows Socrates about to drink the hemlock that killed him. (In ancient Athens

prisoners condemned to death were required to take poison themselves or be killed.) He points to the higher realm which he considers his final destination.

Questions to consider:

1. Socrates has been described as “the founder of moral philosophy”. What was he interested in that made his philosophy different from those who went before him (the Pre-Socratics)?
2. Does it matter to us today that Socrates did not write any of his ideas down?
3. “It does a person far less harm to suffer injustice than to commit it”. What did Socrates mean by this?
4. Why does Socrates say that no one would knowingly do wrong?
5. Why was Socrates considered to be SERIOUSLY annoying (he was described as a ‘gadfly’), but also very popular with young people?