**Socrates**

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This article is about the classical Greek philosopher. For other uses of Socrates, see [Socrates (disambiguation)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socrates_(disambiguation)).



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| Socrates (Σωκράτης) | |
| Socrates | |
| **Born** | c. 469 / 470 BC [Deme](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deme) Alopece, Athens |
| **Died** | 399 BC (age approx. 71) Athens |
| **Nationality** | [Greek](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greeks) |
| **Era** | [Ancient philosophy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_philosophy) |
| **Region** | [Western philosophy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_philosophy) |
| [**School**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_schools_of_philosophy) | [Classical Greek](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_philosophy) |
| **Main interests** | [Epistemology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology), [ethics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics) |
| **Notable ideas** | [Socratic method](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_method), [Socratic irony](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irony#Socratic_irony) |
| Influenced   * Most subsequent [Western philosophy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_philosophy); more specifically, [Plato](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato), [Aristotle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristotle), [Aristippus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristippus), [Antisthenes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antisthenes) | |

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**Socrates** (pron.: [/](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:IPA_for_English)[ˈsɒkrətiːz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:IPA_for_English#Key)[/](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:IPA_for_English); [Greek](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_language): Σωκράτης, Ancient Greek pronunciation: [[sɔːkrátɛːs]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:IPA_for_Greek), Sōkrátēs; c. 469 BC – 399 BC) was a [classical Greek](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_Greece) [Athenian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_Athens) [philosopher](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy). Credited as one of the founders of [Western philosophy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_philosophy), he is an enigmatic figure known chiefly through the accounts of later classical writers, especially the writings of his students [Plato](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato) and [Xenophon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xenophon), and the plays of his contemporary [Aristophanes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristophanes). Many would claim that Plato's dialogues are the 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](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics), and it is this Platonic Socrates who also lends his name to the concepts of Socratic irony and the [Socratic method](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_method), or [elenchus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_method). The latter remains a commonly used tool in a wide range of discussions, and is a type of [pedagogy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pedagogy) in which a series of questions are asked not only to draw individual answers, but also to encourage fundamental insight into the issue at hand. It is Plato's Socrates that also made important and lasting contributions to the fields of [epistemology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology) and [logic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Logic), and the influence of his ideas and approach remains strong in providing a foundation for much western philosophy that followed.

**Biography**

**The Socratic problem**

An accurate picture of the historical Socrates and his philosophical viewpoints is problematic: an issue known as the [Socratic problem](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_problem).

As Socrates did not write philosophical texts, the knowledge of the man, his life, and his philosophy is entirely based on writings by his students and contemporaries. Foremost among them is [Plato](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato); however, works by [Xenophon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xenophon), [Aristotle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristotle), and [Aristophanes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristophanes) also provide important insights. The difficulty of finding the “real” Socrates arises because these works are often philosophical or dramatic texts rather than straightforward histories. Aside from [Thucydides](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thucydides) (who makes no mention of Socrates or philosophers in general) and Xenophon, there are in fact no straightforward histories contemporary with Socrates that dealt with his own time and place. A corollary of this is that sources that do mention Socrates do not necessarily claim to be historically accurate, and are often partisan (those who prosecuted and convicted Socrates have left no testament). Historians therefore face the challenge of reconciling the various texts that come from these men to create an accurate and consistent account of Socrates' life and work. The result of such an effort is not necessarily realistic, merely consistent.

Plato is frequently viewed as the most informative source about Socrates' life and philosophy. At the same time, however, many scholars believe that in some works Plato, being a literary artist, pushed his avowedly brightened-up version of "Socrates" far beyond anything the historical Socrates was likely to have done or said; and that Xenophon, being an historian, is a more reliable witness to the historical Socrates. It is a matter of much debate which Socrates Plato is describing at any given point—the historical figure, or Plato's fictionalization. As [Martin Cohen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Cohen_(philosopher)) has put it, Plato, the idealist, offers "an idol, a master figure, for philosophy. A Saint, a prophet of the 'Sun-God', a teacher condemned for his teachings as a heretic."

It is also clear from other writings and historical artifacts, however, that Socrates was not simply a character, or an invention, of Plato. The testimony of Xenophon and Aristotle, alongside some of Aristophanes' work (especially [The Clouds](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Clouds)), is useful in fleshing out a perception of Socrates beyond Plato's work.

**Life**



[Carnelian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carnelian) gem imprint representing Socrates, Rome, 1st century BC-1st century AD.

Details about Socrates can be derived from three contemporary sources: the [dialogues](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialogue) of Plato and Xenophon (both devotees of Socrates), and the plays of [Aristophanes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristophanes). He has been depicted by some scholars, including [Eric Havelock](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Havelock) and [Walter Ong](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Ong), as a champion of [oral](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orality) modes of communication, standing up at the dawn of [writing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Writing) against its haphazard diffusion.

Aristophanes' play [The Clouds](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Clouds) portrays Socrates as a clown who teaches his students how to bamboozle their way out of debt. Most of Aristophanes' works, however, function as parodies. Thus, it is presumed this characterization was also not literal.

According to Plato, Socrates' father was [Sophroniscus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophroniscus) and his mother [Phaenarete](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phaenarete), a [midwife](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midwife). Though she was characterized as undesirable in temperament, Socrates married [Xanthippe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xanthippe), who was much younger than he. She bore for him three sons [Lamprocles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamprocles), Sophroniscus and [Menexenus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menexenus). His friend [Crito of Alopece](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crito_of_Alopece) criticized him for abandoning his sons when he refused to try to escape before his execution.

It is unclear how Socrates earned a living. Ancient texts seem to indicate that Socrates did not work. In Xenophon's [Symposium](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symposium_(Xenophon)), 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](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophism) school with [Chaerephon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaerephon), while in Plato's [Apology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apology_(Plato)) and [Symposium](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symposium_(Plato)) 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. According to [Timon of Phlius](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timon_of_Phlius) and later sources, Socrates took over the profession of [stonemasonry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stonemasonry) from his father. There was a tradition in antiquity, not credited by modern scholarship, that Socrates crafted the statues of the Three Graces, which stood near the Acropolis until the 2nd century AD.

Several of Plato's dialogues refer to Socrates' military service. Socrates says he served in the Athenian army during three campaigns: at [Potidaea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Potidaea), [Amphipolis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Amphipolis), and [Delium](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Delium). In the Symposium [Alcibiades](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alcibiades) describes Socrates' valour 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](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laches_(dialogue)) by the General after whom the dialogue is named (181b). In the Apology, Socrates compares his military service to his courtroom troubles, and says anyone on the jury who thinks he ought to retreat from philosophy must also think soldiers should retreat when it seems likely that they will be killed in battle.

In 406 he was a member of the [Boule](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boule_(ancient_Greece)), and his tribe the [Antiochis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antiochis) held the [Prytany](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prytany) on the day the Generals of the [Battle of Arginusae](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Arginusae), who abandoned the slain and the survivors of foundered ships to pursue the defeated Spartan navy, were discussed. Socrates was the [Epistates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistates) and resisted the unconstitutional demand for a collective trial to establish the guilt of all eight Generals, proposed by [Callixeinus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Callixeinus). Eventually, Socrates refused to be cowed by threats of impeachment and imprisonment and blocked the vote until his Prytany ended the next day, whereupon the six Generals who had returned to Athens were condemned to death.

In 404, the [Thirty Tyrants](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty_Tyrants) sought to ensure the loyalty of those opposed to them by making them complicit in their activities. Socrates and four others were ordered to bring a certain [Leon of Salamis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leon_of_Salamis) from his home for unjust execution. Socrates quietly refused; his death averted only by the overthrow of the Tyrants soon afterwards.

**Trial and death**

Main article: [Trial of Socrates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trial_of_Socrates)



[The Death of Socrates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Death_of_Socrates), by [Jacques-Louis David](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques-Louis_David) (1787)

Socrates lived during the time of the transition from the height of the [Athenian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian) [hegemony](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hegemony) to its decline with the defeat by [Sparta](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sparta) and its allies in the [Peloponnesian War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peloponnesian_War). At a time when [Athens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_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](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy), and some scholarsinterpret his trial as an expression of political infighting.

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. One of Socrates' purported offenses to the city was his position as a social and moral critic. Rather than upholding a status quo and accepting the development of what he perceived as immorality within his region, Socrates questioned the collective notion of "might makes right" that he felt was common in Greece during this period. Plato refers to Socrates as the "[gadfly](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_gadfly)" of the state (as the gadfly stings the horse into action, so Socrates stung various Athenians), insofar as he irritated some people 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](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pythia) if anyone was wiser than Socrates; the [Oracle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oracle) responded that no-one 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 by approaching men considered wise by the people of Athens—statesmen, poets, and artisans—in order to refute the Oracle's pronouncement. Questioning them, however, Socrates concluded that, while each man thought he knew a great deal and was wise, in fact they knew very little and were not 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 suggested a wage paid by the government and free dinners for the rest of his life instead, to finance the time he spent as Athens' benefactor. He was, nevertheless, found guilty of both corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens and of [impiety](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impiety) ("not believing in the gods of the state"), and subsequently sentenced to death by drinking a mixture containing [poison hemlock](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conium).



Bust of Socrates in the [Vatican Museum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vatican_Museum)

According to Xenophon's story, Socrates purposefully gave a defiant defense to the jury because "he believed he would be better off dead". Xenophon goes on to describe a defense by Socrates that explains the rigors of old age, and how Socrates would be glad to circumvent them by being sentenced to death. It is also understood that Socrates also wished to die because he "actually believed the right time had come for him to die."

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](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_contract)" with the state, and so harm the state, an unprincipled act.

The full reasoning behind his refusal to flee is the main subject of the [Crito](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crito).

Socrates' death is described at the end of Plato's [Phaedo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phaedo). Socrates turned down the pleas of Crito to attempt an escape from prison. After drinking the poison, he was instructed to walk around until his legs felt [numb](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/numb). After he lay down, the man who administered the poison pinched his foot. Socrates could no longer feel his legs. The numbness slowly crept up his body until it reached his heart. Shortly before his death, Socrates speaks his last words to Crito: "Crito, we owe a [rooster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rooster) to [Asclepius](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asclepius). Please, don't forget to pay the debt." Asclepius was the Greek god for curing illness, and it is likely Socrates' last words meant that death is the cure—and freedom, of the soul from the body. Additionally, in Why Socrates Died: Dispelling the Myths, Robin Waterfield adds another interpretation of Socrates' last words. He suggests that Socrates was a voluntary scapegoat; his death was the purifying remedy for Athens’ misfortunes. In this view, the token of appreciation for Asclepius would represent a cure for the ailments of Athens.

**Philosophy**

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| [**Plato**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato) |
| Plato from The School of Athens by Raphael, 1509 |
| * [Early life](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_life_of_Plato) * [Works](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Dialogues_of_Plato) * [Platonism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platonism) * [Epistemology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platonic_epistemology) * [Idealism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platonic_idealism) / [Realism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platonic_realism) * [Demiurge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demiurge) * [Theory of Forms](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_Forms) * [Form of the Good](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Form_of_the_Good) * [Third man argument](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_man_argument) * [Euthyphro dilemma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthyphro_dilemma) * [Five regimes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato%27s_five_regimes) * [Philosopher king](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosopher_king) |
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**Socratic method**

Main article: [Socratic method](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_method)

Perhaps his most important contribution to [Western](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_culture) thought is his [dialectic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialectic) method of inquiry, known as the Socratic method or method of "elenchus", which he largely applied to the examination of key moral concepts such as the Good and [Justice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justice). It was first described by Plato in the Socratic Dialogues. To solve a problem, it would be broken down into a series of questions, the answers to which gradually distill the answer a person would seek. The influence of this approach is most strongly felt today in the use of the [scientific method](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientific_method), in which [hypothesis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypothesis) is the first stage. The development and practice of this method is one of Socrates' most enduring contributions, and is a key factor in earning his mantle as the father of [political philosophy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_philosophy), [ethics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics) or moral philosophy, and as a figurehead of all the central themes in [Western philosophy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_philosophy).

To illustrate the use of the Socratic method; a series of [questions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Question) are posed to help a person or group to determine their underlying [beliefs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belief) and the extent of their knowledge. The Socratic method is a negative method of [hypothesis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypothesis) elimination, in that better hypotheses are found by steadily identifying and eliminating those that lead to [contradictions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contradiction). It was designed to force one to examine one's own beliefs and the validity of such beliefs.

An alternative interpretation of the dialectic is that it is a method for direct perception of the Form of the Good. Philosopher [Karl Popper](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Popper) describes the dialectic as "the art of intellectual intuition, of visualizing the divine originals, the Forms or Ideas, of unveiling the Great Mystery behind the common man's everyday world of appearances." In a similar vein, French philosopher [Pierre Hadot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Hadot) suggests that the dialogues are a type of spiritual exercise. "Furthermore," writes Hadot, "in Plato's view, every dialectical exercise, precisely because it is an exercise of pure thought, subject to the demands of the Logos, turns the soul away from the sensible world, and allows it to convert itself towards the Good."

**Philosophical beliefs**

The beliefs of Socrates, as distinct from those of Plato, are difficult to discern. Little in the way of concrete evidence exists to demarcate the two. The lengthy presentation of ideas given in most of the dialogues may be deformed by Plato, and some scholars think Plato so adapted the Socratic style as to make the literary character and the philosopher himself impossible to distinguish. Others argue that he did have his own theories and beliefs, but there is much controversy over what these might have been, owing to the difficulty of separating Socrates from Plato and the difficulty of interpreting even the dramatic writings concerning Socrates. Consequently, distinguishing the philosophical beliefs of Socrates from those of Plato and Xenophon is not easy and it must be remembered that what is attributed to Socrates might more closely reflect the specific concerns of these thinkers.

The matter is complicated because the historical Socrates seems to have been notorious for asking questions but not answering, claiming to lack wisdom concerning the subjects about which he questioned others.

If anything in general can be said about the philosophical beliefs of Socrates, it is that he was morally, intellectually, and politically at odds with many of his fellow Athenians. When he is on trial for heresy and corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens, he uses his method of elenchos to demonstrate to the jurors that their moral values are wrong-headed. He tells them they are concerned with their families, careers, and political responsibilities when they ought to be worried about the "welfare of their souls". Socrates' assertion that the gods had singled him out as a divine emissary seemed to provoke irritation, if not outright ridicule. Socrates also questioned the Sophistic doctrine that arete (virtue) can be taught. He liked to observe that successful fathers (such as the prominent military general [Pericles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pericles)) did not produce sons of their own quality. Socrates argued that moral excellence was more a matter of divine bequest than parental nurture. This belief may have contributed to his lack of anxiety about the future of his own sons.

Socrates frequently says his ideas are not his own, but his teachers'. He mentions several influences: [Prodicus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prodicus) the [rhetor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhetor) and [Anaxagoras](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anaxagoras) the philosopher. Perhaps surprisingly, Socrates claims to have been deeply influenced by two women besides his mother: he says that [Diotima](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diotima_of_Mantinea), a witch and priestess from [Mantinea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mantinea), taught him all he knows about [eros](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eros_(love)), or [love](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love); and that [Aspasia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aspasia), the mistress of [Pericles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pericles), taught him the art of rhetoric. [John Burnet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Burnet_(classicist)) argued that his principal teacher was the Anaxagorean [Archelaus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archelaus_(philosopher)) but his ideas were as Plato described them; [Eric A. Havelock](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_A._Havelock), on the other hand, considered Socrates' association with the Anaxagoreans to be evidence of Plato's philosophical separation from Socrates.

**Socratic paradoxes**

Many of the beliefs traditionally attributed to the historical Socrates have been characterized as "paradoxical" because they seem to conflict with common sense. The following are among the so-called Socratic Paradoxes:

* No one desires evil.
* No one errs or does wrong willingly or knowingly.
* Virtue—all virtue—is knowledge.
* Virtue is sufficient for happiness.

The phrase [Socratic paradox](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_paradox) can also refer to a self-referential [paradox](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradox), originating in Socrates' phrase, "[I know that I know nothing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_know_that_I_know_nothing) noble and good".

**Knowledge**

One of the best known sayings of Socrates is "[I only know that I know nothing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_know_that_I_know_nothing)". The conventional interpretation of this remark is that Socrates' wisdom was limited to an awareness of his own ignorance. Socrates believed wrongdoing was a consequence of ignorance and those who did wrong knew no better. The one thing Socrates consistently claimed to have knowledge of was "the art of love", which he connected with the concept of "the love of wisdom", i.e., philosophy. He never actually claimed to be wise, only to understand the path a lover of wisdom must take in pursuing it. It is debatable whether Socrates believed humans (as opposed to gods like [Apollo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollo)) could actually become wise. On the one hand, he drew a clear line between human ignorance and ideal knowledge; on the other, Plato's Symposium (Diotima's Speech) and Republic (Allegory of the Cave) describe a method for ascending to wisdom.

In Plato's Theaetetus (150a), Socrates compares himself to a true matchmaker (προμνηστικός promnestikós), as distinguished from a panderer (προᾰγωγός proagogos). This distinction is echoed in Xenophon's Symposium (3.20), when Socrates jokes about his certainty of being able to make a fortune, if he chose to practice the art of pandering. For his part as a philosophical interlocutor, he leads his respondent to a clearer conception of wisdom, although he claims he is not himself a teacher (Apology). His role, he claims, is more properly to be understood as analogous to a [midwife](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midwife) (μαῖα maia). Socrates explains that he is himself barren of theories, but knows how to bring the theories of others to birth and determine whether they are worthy or mere "wind eggs" (ἀνεμιαῖον anemiaion). Perhaps significantly, he points out that midwives are barren due to age, and women who have never given birth are unable to become midwives; they would have no experience or knowledge of birth and would be unable to separate the worthy infants from those that should be left on the hillside to be exposed. To judge this, the midwife must have experience and knowledge of what she is judging.

**Virtue**



Bust of Socrates in the Palermo Archaeological Museum.

Socrates believed the best way for people to live was to focus on self-development rather than the pursuit of material wealth. He always invited others to try to concentrate more on friendships and a sense of true community, for Socrates felt this was the best way for people to grow together as a populace. His actions lived up to this: in the end, Socrates accepted his death sentence when most thought he would simply leave Athens, as he felt he could not run away from or go against the will of his community; as mentioned above, his reputation for valor on the battlefield was without reproach.

The idea that there are certain virtues formed a common thread in Socrates' teachings. These virtues represented the most important qualities for a person to have, foremost of which were the philosophical or intellectual virtues. Socrates stressed that "virtue was the most valuable of all possessions; the ideal life was spent in search of the Good. Truth lies beneath the shadows of existence, and it is the job of the philosopher to show the rest how little they really know."

**Politics**

It is often argued that Socrates believed "ideals belong in a world only the wise man can understand", making the philosopher the only type of person suitable to govern others. In Plato's dialogue the Republic, Socrates openly objected to the [democracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy) that ran Athens during his adult life. It was not only Athenian democracy: Socrates found short of ideal any government that did not conform to his presentation of a perfect regime led by philosophers, and Athenian government was far from that. It is, however, possible that the Socrates of Plato's Republic is colored by Plato's own views. During the last years of Socrates' life, Athens was in continual flux due to political upheaval. Democracy was at last overthrown by a [junta](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_dictatorship) known as the [Thirty Tyrants](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty_Tyrants), led by Plato's relative, [Critias](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critias), who had been a friend of Socrates. The Tyrants ruled for about a year before the Athenian democracy was reinstated, at which point it declared an [amnesty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amnesty) for all recent events.

Socrates' opposition to democracy is often denied, and the question is one of the biggest philosophical debates when trying to determine exactly what Socrates believed. The strongest argument of those who claim Socrates did not actually believe in the idea of philosopher kings is that the view is expressed no earlier than Plato's Republic, which is widely considered one of Plato's "Middle" dialogues and not representative of the historical Socrates' views. Furthermore, according to Plato's Apology of Socrates, an "early" dialogue, Socrates refused to pursue conventional politics; he often stated he could not look into other's matters or tell people how to live their lives when he did not yet understand how to live his own. He believed he was a philosopher engaged in the pursuit of Truth, and did not claim to know it fully. Socrates' acceptance of his death sentence, after his conviction by the [Boule](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boule_(ancient_Greece)) (Council), can also be seen to support this view. It is often claimed much of the anti-democratic leanings are from Plato, who was never able to overcome his disgust at what was done to his teacher. In any case, it is clear Socrates thought the rule of the Thirty Tyrants was also objectionable; when called before them to assist in the arrest of a fellow Athenian, Socrates refused and narrowly escaped death before the Tyrants were overthrown. He did, however, fulfill his duty to serve as [Prytanis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prytanis) when a trial of a group of Generals who presided over a disastrous naval campaign were judged; even then he maintained an uncompromising attitude, being one of those who refused to proceed in a manner not supported by the laws, despite intense pressure. Judging by his actions, he considered the rule of the Thirty Tyrants less legitimate than the Democratic Senate that sentenced him to death.

**Covertness**

In the Dialogues of Plato, Socrates sometimes seems to support a [mystical](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mystical) side, discussing [reincarnation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reincarnation) and the [mystery religions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greco-Roman_mysteries); however, this is generally attributed to Plato. Regardless, this cannot be dismissed out of hand, as we cannot be sure of the differences between the views of Plato and Socrates; in addition, there seem to be some corollaries in the works of Xenophon. In the culmination of the philosophic path as discussed in Plato's Symposium, one comes to the [Sea of Beauty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_of_Beauty) or to the sight of "the beautiful itself" (211C); only then can one become wise. (In the Symposium, Socrates credits his speech on the philosophic path to his teacher, the priestess [Diotima](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diotima_of_Mantinea), who is not even sure if Socrates is capable of reaching the highest mysteries.) In the Meno, he refers to the [Eleusinian Mysteries](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eleusinian_Mysteries), telling Meno he would understand Socrates' answers better if only he could stay for the initiations next week. Further confusions result from the nature of these sources, insofar as the Platonic Dialogues are arguably the work of an artist-philosopher, whose meaning does not volunteer itself to the passive reader nor again the lifelong scholar. According to [Olympiodorus the Younger](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympiodorus_the_Younger) in his **Life of Plato**, Plato himself "received instruction from the writers of tragedy" before taking up the study of philosophy. His works are, indeed, dialogues; Plato's choice of this, the medium of Sophocles, Euripides, and the fictions of theatre, may reflect the ever-interpretable nature of his writings, as he has been called a "dramatist of reason". What is more, the first word of nearly all Plato's works is a significant term for that respective dialogue, and is used with its many connotations in mind. Finally, the Phaedrus and the Symposium each allude to Socrates' coy delivery of philosophic truths in conversation; the Socrates of the Phaedrus goes so far as to demand such dissembling and mystery in all writing. The covertness we often find in Plato, appearing here and there couched in some enigmatic use of symbol and/or irony, may be at odds with the mysticism Plato's Socrates expounds in some other dialogues. These indirect methods may fail to satisfy some readers.

Perhaps the most interesting facet of this is Socrates' reliance on what the Greeks called his "[daemonic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daemon_(mythology)) sign", an averting (ἀποτρεπτικός apotreptikos) inner voice Socrates heard only when he was about to make a mistake. It was this sign that prevented Socrates from entering into politics. In the Phaedrus, we are told Socrates considered this to be a form of "divine madness", the sort of [insanity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insanity) that is a gift from the gods and gives us [poetry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetry), [mysticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mysticism), [love](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love), and even [philosophy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy) itself. Alternately, the sign is often taken to be what we would call "intuition"; however, Socrates' characterization of the phenomenon as "[daemonic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daemon_(mythology))" may suggest that its origin is divine, mysterious, and independent of his own thoughts.

**Satirical playwrights**

He was prominently lampooned in [Aristophanes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristophanes)' [comedy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy) [The Clouds](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Clouds), produced when Socrates was in his mid-forties; he said at his trial (according to Plato) that the laughter of the [theater](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theater) was a harder task to answer than the arguments of his accusers. [Søren Kierkegaard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C3%B8ren_Kierkegaard) believed this play was a more accurate representation of Socrates than those of his students. In the play, Socrates is ridiculed for his dirtiness, which is associated with the [Laconizing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laconophile) fad; also in plays by [Callias](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Callias_(Comic_Poet)), [Eupolis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eupolis), and [Telecleides](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telecleides). Other comic poets who lampooned Socrates include [Mnesimachus](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mnesimachus&action=edit&redlink=1) and [Ameipsias](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ameipsias). In all of these, Socrates and the [Sophists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophist) were criticized for "the moral dangers inherent in contemporary thought and literature".

**Prose sources**

Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle are the main sources for the historical Socrates; however, Xenophon and Plato were direct disciples of Socrates, and they may idealize him; however, they wrote the only continuous descriptions of Socrates that have come down to us in their complete form. Aristotle refers frequently, but in passing, to Socrates in his writings. Almost all of Plato's works center on Socrates. However, Plato's later works appear to be more his own philosophy put into the mouth of his mentor.

**The Socratic dialogues**

Main article: [Socratic dialogue](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_dialogue)

The Socratic Dialogues are a series of [dialogues](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialogue) written by Plato and Xenophon in the form of discussions between Socrates and other persons of his time, or as discussions between Socrates' followers over his concepts. Plato's [Phaedo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phaedo) is an example of this latter category. Although his [Apology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apology_(Plato)) is a monologue delivered by Socrates, it is usually grouped with the Dialogues.

The Apology professes to be a record of the actual speech Socrates delivered in his own defense at the trial. In the Athenian jury system, an "apology" is composed of three parts: a speech, followed by a counter-assessment, then some final words. "Apology" is a [transliteration](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transliteration), not a [translation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Translation), of the Greek apologia, meaning "defense"; in this sense it is not apologetic according to our contemporary use of the term.

Plato generally does not place his own ideas in the mouth of a specific speaker; he lets ideas emerge via the [Socratic Method](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_Method), under the guidance of Socrates. Most of the dialogues present Socrates applying this method to some extent, but nowhere as completely as in the [Euthyphro](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthyphro). In this dialogue, Socrates and [Euthyphro](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthyphro_(prophet)) go through several iterations of refining the answer to Socrates' question, "...What is the pious, and what the impious?"

In Plato's Dialogues, learning appears as a process of remembering. The [soul](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soul), before its incarnation in the body, was in the realm of [Ideas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idea) (very similar to the Platonic "Forms"). There, it saw things the way they truly are, rather than the pale shadows or copies we experience on earth. By a process of questioning, the soul can be brought to remember the ideas in their pure form, thus bringing [wisdom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wisdom).

Especially for Plato's writings referring to Socrates, it is not always clear which ideas brought forward by Socrates (or his friends) actually belonged to Socrates and which of these may have been new additions or elaborations by Plato – this is known as the [Socratic Problem](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_Problem). Generally, the early works of Plato are considered to be close to the spirit of Socrates, whereas the later works – including [Phaedo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phaedo) and [Republic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Republic_(Plato)) – are considered to be possibly products of Plato's elaborations.

**Legacy**

**Immediate influence**

Immediately, the students of Socrates set to work both on exercising their perceptions of his teachings in politics and also on developing many new philosophical schools of thought. Some of Athens' controversial and anti-democratic [tyrants](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyrant) were contemporary or posthumous students of Socrates including [Alcibiades](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alcibiades) and [Critias](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critias). Critias' cousin, Plato would go on to found the [Academy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academy) in 385 BC, which gained so much renown that 'Academy' became the base word for educational institutions in later European languages such as [English](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_language), [French](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_language), and [Italian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_language). Plato's protege, another important figure of the Classical era, [Aristotle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristotle) went on to tutor [Alexander the Great](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_the_Great) and also to found his own school in 335 BC - the [Lyceum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyceum) - whose name also now means an educational institution.

While Socrates was shown to demote the importance of institutional knowledge like [mathematics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mathematics) or [science](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science) in relation to the human condition in his Dialogues, Plato would emphasize it with metaphysical overtones mirroring that of [Pythagoras](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pythagoras) – the former who would dominate Western thought well into the [Renaissance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaissance). Aristotle himself was as much of a philosopher as he was a scientist with rudimentary work in the fields of [biology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biology) and [physics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physics).

Socratic thought which challenged conventions, especially in stressing a simplistic way of living, became divorced from Plato's more detached and philosophical pursuits. This idea was inherited by one of Socrates' older students, [Antisthenes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antisthenes), who became the originator of another philosophy in the years after Socrates' death: [Cynicism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynicism_(philosophy)). Antisthenes attacked Plato and Alcibiades over what he deemed as their betrayal of Socrates' tenets in his writings.

The idea of [asceticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asceticism) being hand in hand with an ethical life or one with piety, ignored by Plato and Aristotle and somewhat dealt with by the Cynics, formed the core of another philosophy in 281 BC – [Stoicism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stoicism) when [Zeno of Citium](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeno_of_Citium) would discover Socrates' works and then learn from [Crates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crates_of_Thebes), a Cynic philosopher. None of the schools however, would inherit his tendency to openly associate with and respect [women](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diotima_of_Mantinea) or the regular citizen.

**Later historical effects**

While some of the later contributions of Socrates to [Hellenistic Era](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellenistic_civilization) culture and philosophy as well as the [Roman Era](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Era) have been lost to time, his teachings began a resurgence in both [medieval Europe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_Ages) and the [Islamic Middle East](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim_history#Early_Caliphate) alongside those of Aristotle and Stoicism. Socrates is mentioned in the dialogue [Kuzari](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuzari) by Jewish philosopher and rabbi [Yehuda Halevi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yehuda_Halevi) in which a Jew instructs the [Khazar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khazar) king about Judaism. [Al-Kindi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Kindi), a well-known Arabic philosopher, introduced and tried to reconcile Socrates and Hellenistic philosophy to an Islamic audience, referring to him by the name 'Suqrat'.

Socrates' stature in Western philosophy returned in full force with the Renaissance and the Age of Reason in Europe when political theory began to resurface under those like [Locke](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Locke) and [Hobbes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hobbes). [Voltaire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voltaire) even went so far as to write a [satirical play](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voltaire%27s_Socrates_(play)) about the [Trial of Socrates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trial_of_Socrates). There were a number of paintings about his life including Socrates Tears Alcibiades from the Embrace of Sensual Pleasure by [Jean-Baptiste Regnault](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Baptiste_Regnault) and The Death of Socrates by [Jacques-Louis David](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques-Louis_David) in the later 18th century.

To this day, the [Socratic Method](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_Method) is still used in classroom and law school discourse to expose underlying issues in both subject and the speaker. He has been recognized with accolades ranging from frequent mentions in pop culture (such as the movie [Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_and_Ted%27s_Excellent_Adventure) and a [Greek rock band](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socrates_Drank_The_Conium)) to numerous busts in academic institutions in recognition of his contribution to education.

Over the past century, numerous plays about Socrates have also focused on Socrates’ life and influence. One of the most recent has been [Socrates on Trial](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socrates_on_Trial_(play)), a play based on Aristophanes' Clouds and Plato's Apology, Crito, and Phaedo, all adapted for modern performance.

**Criticism**

Evaluation and reaction to Socrates has been undertaken with both historical and philosophical inquiry from the time of his death to the present day with a multitude of conclusions and perspectives. One of the initial criticisms levied against the philosopher was presented at his [trial](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trial_of_Socrates) – that he was not the proponent of a philosophy but an individual with a method of undermining the fabric of Athenian society, a charge carried by the 500-man jury of Athenians that sentenced him to death. Although he was not directly prosecuted for his connection to Critias, leader of the Spartan-backed [Thirty Tyrants](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty_Tyrants), he was seen as a controversial figure, who mentored oligarchs who became abusive tyrants, and undermined Athenian democracy. The Sophist establishment he railed at in life survived him, but by the 3rd century BC, was rapidly overtaken by the many philosophical schools of thought that Socrates influenced.

Socrates' death is considered iconic and his status as a martyr of philosophy overshadowed most contemporary and posthumous criticism at the time. However, Xenophon attempts to explain that Socrates purposely welcomed the hemlock due to his old age using the arguably self-destructive testimony to the jury as evidence. Direct criticism of Socrates almost disappears at this point, but there is a noticeable preference for Plato or Aristotle over the elements of Socratic philosophy distinct from those of his students, even into the Middle Ages.

Modern scholarship holds that, with so much of the philosopher obscured and possibly altered by Plato, it is impossible to gain a clear picture of Socrates amidst all the seeming contradictions. That both [Cynicism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynicism_(philosophy)) and [Stoicism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stoicism), which carried heavy influence from Socratic thought, were unlike or even contrary to [Platonism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platonism) further illustrates this. The ambiguity and lack of reliability serves as the modern basis of criticism – that it is near impossible to know the real Socrates. Some controversy also exists about claims of Socrates exempting himself from the [homosexual customs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality_in_ancient_Greece) of [ancient Greece](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Greece) and not believing in the [Olympian gods](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve_Olympians) to the point of being monotheistic or if this was an attempt by later Medieval scholars to reconcile him with the morals of the era. However, it is still commonly taught and held with little exception that Socrates is the founder of modern Western philosophy, to the point that philosophers before him are referred to as pre-Socratic.

**Ahmadiyya viewpoint**

[Mirza Tahir Ahmad](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirza_Tahir_Ahmad) argued in his book [Revelation, Rationality, Knowledge & Truth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revelation,_Rationality,_Knowledge_%26_Truth) that Socrates was a [prophet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prophet) of the ancient Greeks. The apparent prophetic qualities of Socrates are indeed a subject for debate. His constant reference to the oracle and how it performs the active function of a moral compass by preventing him from unseemly acts could easily be taken as a reference to – or substitute for [revelation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revelation). Similarly, Socrates often refers to [God](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God) in the singular as opposed to the plural and actively rejected the Greek pantheon of Gods and Goddesses unless citing them as examples of their falseness.

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