

Socrates

Despite being one of the most influential and inspiring of all philosophers very little is known about Socrates. All we know with some degree of certainty is that he was executed for 'corrupting the youth of Athens and denying the gods of the state' in 399 BC and that he was very ugly (everyone says so).

Nevertheless there's also broad consensus on the following. Socrates was probably born in 470 BC. He does not seem to have been of noble birth. His father was probably a stonemason, for Socrates was one and it was traditional to take on the profession of your parents. He also served as an infantryman in the Athenian army where he gained a reputation for steadfastness and endurance.

One report says that he was completely indifferent to cold and would march barefoot even at the height of winter. At some point, and we do not know when or why, Socrates got the philosophy bug. He turned his attention away from the banalities of earning a living and devoted all his time to searching for moral truth. As he said, 'an unexamined life is not worth living' so he took to doing nothing but examining life. In particular, he became obsessed with finding the answer to the moral question of how one ought to live one's life. He thought this was the most important question worth asking, and so the one that one should devote the most amount of time to trying to answer. He took to walking the streets of Athens philosophising with any and all.

Debating skills were so highly prized in Ancient Athens. This was partly due to the legal system which allowed you to be taken to court by pretty much anyone at any time for anything (the jury would decide whether what you were being put on trial for was a crime).

So, being able to argue well was essential to being successful for chances are you were always going to be called upon to do so. As a result you could earn a very good living teaching debating skills (this is partly why there was such a blossoming of philosophy in Athens). Such teachers were known as 'Sophists' from which we get our modern term 'sophistry'.

Socrates, however, spurned money and charged nothing. He would argue for free, and because he reasoned so well, you could learn a lot just listening to him. As you can imagine, this was already likely to anger the sophists as he was in effect stealing their clients. But Socrates was adamant that the purpose of reasoned debate was to uncover the truth, and that was more important than making a living (or protecting others from losing theirs).

Socrates had a wife and three children. It isn't known how he supported them while he was street-philosophizing (women did not work in Ancient Athens and so a wife was reliant on her husband's income). And it certainly seems to have introduced some tensions into Socrates' home life. Socrates' wife once threw a full chamber pot over him in the street out of frustration.

However, despite his domestic problems Socrates' street philosophising won him many followers among the wealthy aristocratic young men of Ancient Athens, including the most famous of all: Plato. It is possible – indeed, highly likely – that Socrates lived on handouts from his followers.

Socrates was put on trial in 399 BC. He was an elderly man by this point. However, the newly installed democratic government wanted to make an example of him. The previous regime – a brief but disastrous and hated tyranny, led by the 'thirty tyrants' - had been one with which Socrates had been associated. The most infamous of the tyrants had been a former follower of Socrates (though Socrates himself was no fan of the regime and had there not been a coup would almost certainly

have been executed). Plus Socrates was known to be no fan of democracy and encouraged antidemocratic feeling among his followers.

Socrates also believed in a 'god' rather than 'gods' (he professed to have an inner voice, the voice of god, that warned him against some actions but never told him positively what to do).

Socrates was charged with corrupting the youth of Athens and of not believing in the state gods. The intention was probably just to give him a bit of a shock and humiliate him for symbolic reasons.

However, Socrates didn't play ball and rather than meekly accept the charges and agree to stop philosophising (which would almost certainly have resulted in him being allowed to go free) he denied the charges and argued that he had actually benefited the state and therefore ought to be rewarded by being provided with accommodation and free food! This outraged the court and resulted in a death sentence. He had to drink a cup of hemlock.

His rich and powerful friends arranged to break him out of prison. But Socrates refused to escape, insisting that he must accept the punishment handed down by the court. When the cup of hemlock was brewed he drank it calmly and without hesitation.

The poison works by slowly paralysing the body's muscles. The legs are paralysed first. The paralysis then creeps up the body and when it reaches the chest it causes a heart attack.

Socrates wrote nothing down (perhaps because he couldn't write, but more likely because he distrusted writing). So when it comes to understanding his philosophical views we are completely reliant on the writings of others. There are three main sources of information. One, the playwright

Aristophanes, is the only source that knew Socrates as a young man. He wrote a play called 'The Clouds' featuring Socrates. But 'The Clouds' is a comedy and is not intended to represent an accurate picture of either Socrates the man or Socrates' ideas.

The second source is Xenophon. Xenophon was a student of Socrates. However, Xenophon was neither very philosophically disposed nor particularly intelligent. As Bertrand Russell put it: A stupid man's report of what a clever man says is never accurate, because he unconsciously translates what he hears into something that he can understand. I would rather be reported by my bitterest enemy among philosophers than by a friend innocent of philosophy.

The final source is another of Socrates' pupils: Plato. Plato was a brilliant philosopher in his own right and a great writer. Plato wrote approximately 36 dialogues featuring Socrates as the central character (the precise number is actually a matter of debate with the authenticity of some being in question). The difficulty with Plato's dialogues is that it is hard to know to what extent we are being provided with Socrates' ideas and to what extent Socrates is being used as a mouthpiece for Plato's ideas. And this is the Socratic problem: we don't exactly know where Socrates ends and Plato begins.

Although Plato was a student of Socrates, Socrates was executed when Plato was only 25. So it is likely that all of Plato's dialogues were written after Socrates' death and are not verbatim reports of what Socrates actually said. Another prominent philosopher –

Aristotle – stated that many of the ideas put forward in the dialogues are not ones that Socrates, himself, ever espoused). However, most agree that the early dialogues probably give a fairly accurate account of Socrates' views, whereas later ones contain more of Plato's own ideas.

Socrates' Method

Legend has it that Socrates' friend Chaerephon asked the Oracle at Delphi if there is anyone wiser than Socrates. She replied 'no'.

Socrates was surprised and confused. As far as he was concerned he knew virtually nothing. So Socrates set about trying to prove the Oracle wrong. He sought those that claimed to be wise, or had a reputation for wisdom, and questioned them to about how we should live our lives. By asking questions, in particular by seeking definitions of key value terms like 'justice,' 'courage' and 'temperance,' he unearthed inconsistencies in the person's beliefs.

This happened every time. Upon questioning it turned out that all these so-called 'wise men' did not know anything. However, unlike Socrates, they did not recognise their own ignorance. Socrates, then, knows one thing: that he is ignorant. This is something that others do not know.

This makes it sound as if Socrates' philosophy is entirely negative – a process of destruction in which all positive claims are shown to be confused and incoherent. This isn't how Socrates saw it.

Even if no definitions are arrived at, even if no positive knowledge is achieved, Socrates saw the very activity of engaging in questioning – of trying to hunt down definitions – as valuable.

Examining one's life and trying – even fruitlessly – to discover what is truly valuable is, for Socrates, the most worthwhile thing one can do with one's time.

Socrates also invites us to recognise the value of discovering that we are wrong. As Socrates often pointed out, it is better to be aware of your ignorance than to be unaware of it. Of course, when you discover that a belief of yours is false, you are disappointed. We all hate being wrong. But think about why you hate being wrong. You hate being wrong precisely because something in you desires truth. Thus, on reflection, you should really be glad when you discover you are mistaken, as it brings you closer to fulfilling that desire.

So, Socrates thinks we should positively welcome our ideas being subject to scrutiny and found wanting for only in this way can we draw closer to the truth. As Socrates often points out: it is better to be aware of your ignorance than to be unaware of it.

Socrates' Paradoxes

There are several so-called 'Socratic paradoxes'. These are not really 'paradoxes' at all (the term has simply stuck). They are just principles or maxims that turn up again and again in the dialogues and seem, to some extent anyway, to hang together as a coherent whole. Thus, they might be said to positively characterise Socrates' philosophy. We've encountered one above: it is better to be aware of your ignorance than to be unaware of your ignorance.

Socrates sought truth and repeatedly linked knowledge with virtue and ignorance with vice. Knowledge, said Socrates, is virtue. What might this mean?

We all want the truth (which is precisely why we're disappointed when we discover we're wrong about something) and we all want to do good. We all want to live a life of virtue. This is because it is in your interests to live a virtuous life: such a life is the best kind of life for you to live. So much so, that it is always better to be wronged than to do wrong. Being wronged is compatible with living a life of virtue and so compatible with living the best kind of life. But doing wrong is (by definition) incompatible with living the best kind of life.

Morality and self-interest

Nowadays most of us think of morality and self-interest as coming into conflict, at least on occasion. For instance, it is 'right' (surely) for me to tell the shopkeeper that she has given me too much change. But it is in my self-interests (surely) to say nothing. So what's Socrates on about? Morality and self-interest are surely not the same thing.

Socrates would say such a reply reveals ignorance – ignorance of where one's true self-interests lie. Most of us are not very wise and this lack of wisdom results in us perceiving our moral interests and self-interests as not being synonymous. But a wise person knows they are two sides of the same coin. Yes, if I kept the change I'd be slightly better off financially. But the test of success in life is not the size of one's bank balance, but the quality of one's character.

Living a life of virtue requires that one knows what virtue consists in. This is one way in which knowledge is a requirement for virtuous living. But when Socrates said that knowledge is virtue, he meant something stronger than this. Socrates believed that if you know what is right, you'll necessarily do what is right. In other words, weakness of will ('Akrasia') is impossible. If you know that Xing is wrong, then you won't X. After all, no one would knowingly do something against their own interests.

Those, then, are the core beliefs that characterise Socrates' position. Each claim is controversial and disputable. However, they seem to hang together as a whole and so can be said to be the core of Socrates positive position.

Here is a summary of Socrates' core doctrines:

- It is better to be aware of one's ignorance than unaware of one's ignorance.
- It is better to be wronged than to do wrong.
- The virtuous life is in our interests.
- Knowledge of what virtue consists in guarantees that one will live virtuously.