

# SOCRATES

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Socrates did not write any philosophical texts. What we know of his ideas and beliefs are based on the writings of his students, in particular those of Plato. Because we don't have Socrates' words directly it is difficult to identify the "real" Socrates. In the dialogues written by Plato it is nearly impossible to tell which are the views of Socrates and which are those of Plato, himself.

Perhaps the most enduring contribution made by Socrates was his method of inquiry that became known as the Socratic method. Hypotheses are proposed and eliminated as a way of discussing complex topics. By eliminating hypotheses through careful discussion, underlying issues are exposed. The Socratic Method, still used today, influenced modern-day scientific method.

In its simplest form, the Socratic Method takes a problem and breaks it down into a series of questions which are gradually examined and discussed for better and better solutions. The Questioner and the questioned explore the implications of different viewpoints. As the argument goes through different iterations, it becomes more and more difficult to refute. Socrates believed that this brought us closer to the truth. Socrates believed in the immortality of the soul. Socrates questioned if arete (virtue) can be taught. He believed that moral excellence resulted from divine bequest rather than nurturing.

**Method of Socrates:** A method by which knowledge is expanded or gained by pursuing a series of questions and examining the implications of the answers.

**Background:** Socrates was born around 469 B.C.E. in Athens. Much of his early life is unknown. The little bit we do know comes from the dialogues of Plato and Xenophon as well as plays by Aristophanes. Socrates was born into a respectable family that was relatively poor. He had a traditional Greek education which included reading, writing, gymnastics, music, geometry and astronomy.

Socrates' intellectual pursuits were largely self-motivated. It is unclear who his teachers were. According to Plato he met Zeno of Elea and Parmenides. He also learned from Diotima and Aspasia, both women. It is unclear how Socrates earned a living. At one time he was a member of the senate of Athens. He also possibly served in the Athenian army. Most works suggest that Socrates did not work at all but instead spent all of his time discussing philosophy in Athens.

Socrates' trial and execution are perhaps the most remembered part of his life. Socrates' pursuit of virtue and truth clashed with the politics of the day. He raised questions about Athenian religion and democracy. Furthermore, he openly praised the Spartans, Athenians' arch-rivals. Socrates appointed himself the social and moral critic of Athens and ruffled many feathers. His "crime" was that of corrupting the minds of young Athenians by questioning the wisdom and ideas of the day. He was found guilty and sentenced to death by drinking a mixture containing the poison hemlock.

**Ethics:** Socrates believed that Ethics were developed through mathematics, wisdom, and love. Socrates asserted that ethics can be taught. His introduction of standards of teaching ethics around 400 B.C.E. had a lasting impact on Western thought.

**Government:** Socrates opposed democracy. He was against any form of government that was not led by philosophers. Socrates asserted that philosophers were the only people suitable to govern others. Furthermore, he suggested that the majority was not capable of good decision-making. Instead, it is more valuable for those governing to make logical and defensible decisions.\*

# §SOCRATES§

## Key Ideas

**Society:** According to Socrates, society existed to provide the best life for an individual. Societies are formed because individuals are not self-sufficient. Individuals must work together to acquire all that is needed for survival. Society is separated into specialized labor functions and distinct classes (farmers, builders, etc.) Additionally, there are those who manage society. These people might be called upon to settle disputes within the society.

**Education:** Socrates suggested that there are 2 kinds of knowledge: important and trivial. Many people know "trivial" things. A craftsman knows important knowledge about his craft and himself. The craftsman's "important" knowledge is not the kind of knowledge that Socrates perceived to be important. Socrates suggests that important knowledge relates to "how best to live." Using the Socratic method, he and his students discover important knowledge. The goal, therefore, of education is to know what you can and know what you do not know.

**Human Nature:** Humans, according to Socrates, are capable of being good. The knowledge that one can be good allows one to choose the path to good and not to evil. Human potential is unlimited. The human mind is constantly learning and capable of gaining more and more knowledge. This search for knowledge varies among individual human beings. Humans possess an inner-self which is divine. It will live forever with the gods. Humans are the only creatures who recognize the difference between virtue (knowledge) and ignorance. Ignorance is the root of all evil.

**Will:** Socrates was deeply interested in the weakness of will. He and his students questioned whether one does wrong when they genuinely know what is right. Socrates argued that people do evil when they perceive that the benefits outweigh the costs. Thus ethics was a matter of personal balance between benefits and costs of one's actions.

\* Note: The viewpoints may or may not have been Socrates' beliefs as they are only known to us through the writings of Plato.