

Philosophers: Socrates

Synopsis: Socrates was born around 470 B.C. in Athens, Greece. The "Socratic method," or teaching by asking questions, was the important part of his philosophy, or the study of the meaning of life. Greece changed after Athens lost a great war, and Socrates became an enemy. He was arrested and sentenced to death by poisoning in 399 B.C.

Early Years

Socrates, born around 470 B.C. in Athens, Greece, did not write about his life or work. We know about his life through the writing of others. Plato, one of his students, wrote about his teachings, Xenophon wrote about his trial, and Aristophanes wrote Socrates into his play, *The Clouds*. This is all the information we have about the life of Socrates. They give us ideas about his philosophy, or meaning of life, and his personality.

Socrates was the son of Sophroniscus, an Athenian stone cutter and Phaenarete. Because he wasn't from a rich family, he probably received a basic Greek education and learned his father's craft at a young age. It is believed Socrates worked as a stone cutter for many years before he began to study philosophy. It is not clear how Socrates supported himself as a philosopher. Both Xenophon and Aristophanes state Socrates received payment for teaching, while Plato writes Socrates never accepted money and was poor.

Socrates married Xanthippe, a younger woman, and they had three sons, Lamprocles, Sophroniscus and Menexenus. Xenophon wrote that Xanthippe was "undesirable" and not well educated. She was not happy and complained that Socrates wasn't making enough money. By his own words, Socrates had little to do with his sons and was far more interested in teaching the young boys of Athens.

Athenian law required all males between 18 and 60 to serve as soldiers. According to Plato, Socrates served in the "hoplite" having a shield, long spear and face mask. He was in the Peloponnesian War, fighting for Athens against Sparta, another Greek city-state. He fought at Delium, Amphipolis and Potidaea, where he saved the life of a general. Socrates was known for his courage in battle and fearlessness, which stayed with him throughout his life. After his trial,

he compared his refusal to run away from being sentenced to death to a soldier's refusal to retreat from battle.

Plato wrote that Socrates was short and stocky, with a snub nose and bulging eyes that always seemed to be staring. However, Plato pointed out that in the eyes of his students, Socrates was handsome because of his brilliant debates and sharp thinking, not his physical appearance. Socrates always emphasized the importance of the mind over the human body. This led to Plato's philosophy of dividing reality into the world of the senses and the world of ideas. The world of ideas was the important one.

Philosopher

Socrates believed people learn more from using their minds to reason than from religious teaching. He pointed out that human choice was most interested in happiness. Having wisdom comes from knowing oneself. The more a person knows, the greater is the ability to make choices that will bring true happiness. Socrates believed government worked best when ruled by individuals who had the greatest ability, knowledge, and a complete understanding of themselves.

For Socrates, Athens was a classroom, and he went about asking questions of both the upper and lower classes, trying to find truth. Socrates didn't lecture about what he knew and really claimed to be ignorant because he had no ideas, but was smart enough to know he knew nothing. He asked questions using the Socratic Method, which forced the person to think through a problem to a logical conclusion. Sometimes the answer seemed so clear, it made people look foolish. For this, he was admired by some but hated by others.

During Socrates' life, Athens was changing from hegemony or complete control of its world to doubting its own power and strength. In 404 B.C., Sparta defeated Athens in the 27-year Peloponnesian War. As a result, they held on to old ways, the importance of money, and the importance of physical beauty. Socrates attacked the old gods and ideas, teaching new ways of thinking to the young. He insisted that the mind was more important than the ways of the past. While many Athenians admired Socrates' challenges and the humorous way he went about

them, an equal number grew angry and felt he threatened their way of life. He was arrested and went on trial.

Execution

Socrates was defiant and stubborn in defending his ideas. The jury convicted Socrates by a vote of 280 to 221. Athenian law allowed a convicted citizen to offer his own punishment.

Socrates suggested the city provide him with free food and pay him for his new ideas about thinking. The jury was not amused and sentenced him to death by drinking poison hemlock.

Before Socrates' execution, friends offered to bribe the guards and rescue him so he could run away. He said he wasn't afraid of death and was still a loyal citizen of Athens, willing to follow its laws, even the ones that condemned him to death. Plato described Socrates' death: He drank the hemlock mixture without hesitation. Numbness slowly crept into his body until it reached his heart. Shortly before his final breath, Socrates described his death as a release of the soul from the body.

1) Read the section "Philosopher." Which sentence in this section BEST explains how Socrates tried to change the way the people of Athens thought?

A: Socrates believed people learn more from using their minds to reason than from religious teaching.

B: For Socrates, Athens was a classroom, and he went about asking questions of both the upper and lower classes, trying to find truth.

C: He asked questions using the Socratic Method, which forced the person to think through a problem to a logical conclusion.

D: He insisted that the mind was more important than the ways of the past.

2) What is the MOST important reason why Socrates did not run away from death or battle?

A: He had a shield, a long spear and a face mask.

B: His friends planned to rescue him.

C: He was defiant and stubborn.

D: He was courageous and fearless.

3) Read the section "Execution." Which piece of evidence BEST explains the cause of Socrates' death?

A: Socrates suggested the city provide him with free food and pay him for his new ideas about thinking.

B: Socrates was defiant and stubborn in defending his ideas.

C: The jury convicted Socrates by a vote of 280 to 221.

D: Shortly before his final breath, Socrates described his death as a release of the soul from the body.

4) Plato would be MOST likely to agree with which of the following statements?

A: The body is as important as the mind.

B: People can use their minds to reason from religious teachings.

C: The mind is more important than money.

D: The world of senses is of the greatest importance.