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Socrates (469 B.C.-399 B.C.)

Socrates, the most prominent Greek philosopher of the fifth century, saw the century out with his death. He belongs to his own time fiercely, as an ambulatory thinker and 'gadfly,' known for his lifetime of conversing with his fellow citizens. But he had other reasons to respect himself: as a military man who performed yeoman service in the many wars Athens fought in the mid-fifth century; as a senator from his district; as a householder with sons; in short as a full-complement citizen of Athenian democracy. His death, known to all, is a shame to Athens, but 'makes sense' from certain perspectives.

Throughout his public life Socrates, who was a follower of Anaxagoras (500-428 B.C.), remained in or near Athens, often teaching and discussing in public. (*Note*: the life and thought of Socrates, who never wrote, is preserved for us by his pupil, Plato, and it is very hard to distinguish Socrates the man from the figure of Socrates who is an essential character in Plato's work.) The main themes of his own teaching are simple, but his gift both for poetry and argumentation lifts those themes to world importance. Above all, Socrates remains true to the questioning tradition which dominated Milesian thought—Thales, Heracleitus--and which we have seen marking out a path sharply different from the mythological thinking of archaic Greek epic poetry. (Chronology matters here. The Milesians flourished in the first half of the sixth century, Socrates in the second half of the fifth century: over a century passed here, in which early Milesian thought was being supplemented by a lineage of distinguished thinkers—Heraclitus, Parmenides, Pythagoras—who were all formative for Socrates. Socrates found himself at the end of a distinguished line of 'analytical' thinkers.) As such he crowns the Hellenic thought development which has often been related to a global 'conscientization' of humanity around the fifth century B.C.; a vast movement of growing self awareness whose master thinkers would include Buddha, Lao tzu, Zoroaster, and Confucius, in addition to Socrates.

I decided that it was not wisdom that enabled poets to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration, such as you find in seers and prophets who deliver all their sublime messages without knowing in the least what they mean.

Socrates' argument. It is important to start with what Socrates did not do as a philosopher. For one thing, he did not write down his thoughts. For another, he did not lay down doctrines, positions that could be repeated and analyzed by others. (He left that to others, like Plato or Xenophon, who were sufficiently fascinated by him, that they built him into their own structures of thought.) Instead, it seems, he argued out the implications of ethical decision, by challenging interlocutors to examine what was implicit in their beliefs. For example, when those who talked with him in the marketplace or at the palestra (sports center) expounded ideas of what constituted virtue, he led them to examine those ideas and, in every case, to show themselves up as not knowing what they meant and not knowing the implications of what they said. In mock humility, Socrates made as though to subject himself to the same ruthless kind of critique. He referred—in Plato's *Apology*, the account of Socrates' trial statement—to the widely known response of the Delphic oracle that 'Socrates is the wisest of men.' This verdict seemed to Socrates to be indefensible until he began to query men who considered themselves wise, and found that they had no understanding of, for instance, what constitutes virtue or courage. And in what did Socrates exceed these other candidates for wisdom? How did he evaluate himself? He knew that he

was not wise, while all the others thought, mistakenly, that they were wise. This method of inquiry, by which the interlocutor is invited to trap himself in admissions of ignorance, is the basic form of Socratic argument, and was by subsequent critics called his *elenchos*, or cross-examination, technique. It will already be apparent, perhaps, that other philosophical positions will build from this *elenchos* work; it is clear that for Socrates an evanescent *truth* is the essence against which inquiry takes place, although that truth is present in the argument as a negative, the absolute condition which has to pertain in order for partial truths to be partial. From that implication we may already site the influence of Socrates on the huge written opus of his pupil Plato, for the development of a theory of ideas, in which the issue of truth could be firmly embedded, awaited the full development of Plato's own philosophy.

Who was Socrates? Socrates remains a mysterious figure. He wrote nothing, and so we are dependent, for our knowledge about him, on others who wrote about him. (There are three main sources of this kind: Xenophon (#63), the memoirist and military historian, who lived Socrates' world; the comic writer Aristophanes, who pilloried Socrates in contemporary plays like *The Birds;* and Plato, for whom Socrates became a leitmotif for increasingly refined dialogues of thought.) What most grounds Socrates is his trial, his reaction to it, and the place he played in his time. The trial in question stemmed from a culture suspicious above all of religious unorthodoxy; and the initial charge was that Socrates was indifferent to traditional religious practices. The world in which Socrates was put to death, for suspicions of this sort, was one in which public self-confidence was at a low.

The historical setting of Socrates' trial and death. A history of Ancient Greece will help to guide you through the rapids of Greek cultural history from 700 to 350 B.C. Socrates died in 399 B.C., Plato in 348 B.C., Alexander the Great in 323 B.C., Aristotle in 322 B.C. During the three centuries prior to Alexander's death Athens—remember our emphasis is falling on *Athens*, though a coherent (if less interesting) history could have been written about Thebes, Corinth, Sparta, and other city-states—passed through many social/political turns: during the seventh century the city-state defined itself slowly off from the epic clan and family world of Homer, making possible the growth, by the sixth century, of early forms of democracy, a coinage economy, a useable legal system, and a cohesive military force. The fifth century debuts with a huge challenge, The Persian Wars, which provide tumultuous victory followed quickly, in mid-century, by conflict and then War between Athens and Sparta, the two allies active in defeating the Persians. The teachings of Socrates occurred in an Athens which was on the verge of its eventual defeat by Sparta, and the death of Socrates coincided with post-war confusion, and a shaky alternation between tyranny and return to democracy. In the midst of such rapid change, Athens found itself hungry for its old traditions, suspicious of new and tricky teachings like those of the Sophists—which Socrates had nothing to do with—and ready for a kind of Joseph McCarthy purge of unorthodox thinkers. Into that vortex Socrates fell.