not material, perhaps some sort of essence; and that he was trying to discover the nature of this abstract reality. This view of his was to be developed in the work of his disciple Plato into a belief in abstract Ideas as the perfect and permanent forms of all the entities and characteristics to be found in this imperfect and impermanent world of our daily lives.

"WHAT IS JUSTICE?"

SOCRATES

The very nature of what Socrates did made him a disruptive and subversive influence. He was teaching people to question everything, and he was exposing the ignorance of individuals in power and authority. He became a highly controversial figure, much loved but also much hated. At one of the city's public festivals he was caricatured in the theatre in front of the whole population of Athens by the comic dramatist Aristophanes, in a play called The Clouds (423 BC). In the end, the authorities arrested him on charges of corrupting the young, and of not believing in the gods of the city. He was tried, and condemned to die by poison. The detailed story of his trial and death is one of the most inspiring tragedies in the history of human thought.

What has made Socrates in some ways the best known of all philosophers is that it was he who began the relentless questioning of our basic concepts that has been characteristic of philosophy ever since. He used to say that he had no positive teachings to offer, only questions to ask. But this was distinguious. From certain lines of questioning to

ARISTOPHANES

The immortal comedian Aristophanes was the greatest comic playwright of ancient Greece. In one of his plays he caricatured Socrates on the stage. This indicates how well known in the public Socrates had become.

which he continually revert, it becomes clear that there are certain cherished beliefs that underlie much of what he says.

One is that to a man who preserves his integrity no real, long-term harm can ever come. The uncertainties of this world are such that it can happen to anybody that he is stripped of all his possessions and thrown into prison unjustly, or crippled by accident or disease; but these are chance happenings in a fleeting existence that is going to end soon anyway. Provided your soul remains untouched, your misfortunes will be comparatively trivial. Real personal catastrophe consists in corruption of the soul. That is why it does a person far, far less harm to suffer injustice than to commit it. We should pity the perpetrator of injustice, not the victim of injustice.

This belief of Socrates made him a hero to the Stoics, who hundreds of years later turned him into a sort of secular patron saint. Another basic belief of Socrates was that no-one really knowingly does wrong. His point here was that if you really do in the fullest sense understand that it is wrong to do something, then you do not do it. Conversely, if you
do do it, this shows that you have not properly grasped, deep down, that it is wrong. This view has the consequence that virtue becomes a matter of knowledge. This conviction on Socrates' part provided a great deal of the drive behind his tireless pursuit of questions like "What is justice?": he believed that if only we knew the answer to that question we would be bound to behave justly. In such cases, the pursuit of knowledge and an aspiration to virtue are one and the same thing.

BE TRUE TO YOURSELF
It is doubtful whether any philosopher has had more influence than Socrates. He was the first to teach the priority of personal integrity in terms of a person's duty to himself, and not to the gods, or the law, or any other authorities. This has had incalculable influence down the ages. Not only was he willing to die at the hands of the law rather than give up saying what he believed to be right, he actually chose to do so, when he could have escaped had he wished. It is a priority that has been reasserted by some of the greatest minds since—minds not necessarily under his influence. Jesus said: "What will a man gain by winning the whole world, at the cost of his true self?" And Shakespeare said: "This above all: to thine own self be true."

In addition to this, Socrates did more than any other individual to establish the principle that everything must be open to question—there can be no cut and dried answers, because answers, like everything else, are themselves open to question. Following on from this, he established at the centre of philosophy a method known as dialectic, the method of seeking truth by a process of question and answer. It has remained there ever since, and is used particularly as a teaching method—which is after all what Socrates himself used it for. It is not equally appropriate for all forms of teaching—it is not, for example, a good way of imparting pure information—but as a way of getting people to re-examine what they think they already know, it is incomparable. To be most effective it calls for a sympathetic personal relationship between teacher and pupil, one in which the teacher truly understands the pupil's difficulties and prompts him step by step in the right direction. This is often still called "Socratic method".

THE DEATH OF SOCRATES
This famous painting by the French artist David, completed in 1787, shows Socrates about to drink the hemlock that killed him. In ancient Athens, prisoners condemned to death were required to take poison themselves or be killed. He points to the higher realm which he considers his final destination.