Socrates: An Examined Life

Socrates left no writings and offered no theories to the world. However, his life and work mark a change in the direction of Western thought: No longer were philosophers trying to explain the world at large, but they were seeking to explain how humanity should behave within it.

A conversation with Socrates would have been frustrating. The only thing he ever agreed with is his oft-quoted statement: “I know one thing: I know nothing.” This skeptical approach to public life earned Socrates admirers and detractors alike. Among the admirers was Plato, from whom we get most of our information on Socrates. Among his detractors were the ruling class of Athens, who eventually were so incensed by his activities that they sentenced him to death! How could a man who just talked end up in such trouble?

Examining everything
In middle age, Socrates was wealthy enough to pursue his passion, to be a philosopher. He did not search for answers about big subjects like the nature of the Universe or the nature of material. He was interested in the virtues and vices that people use to describe themselves, such as good, bad, courage, and justice.

SOCRATIC DIALOGUE: COURAGE
Socrates wants a definition of bravery, one aspect of goodness, and approaches Leaches and Nicias, two Athenian generals.

Leaches: To be brave is to stand and fight. Socrates: How can you be brave when you are not fighting?
Leaches: Bravery is endurance.
Socrates: For bravery to be a form of good it cannot contradict prudence. Sometimes it is prudent— and tell braver—to not endure, but withdraw.
Nicias: Bravery is knowing what is to be feared and hoped for.
Socrates: Does that mean animals have courage? Can a pig be brave?
Nicias: No, the brute require a wisdom that very few people have.
Socrates: Being fearful is to expect a future evil and being hopeful is expecting a future good. If bravery requires an understanding of future good and evil it must also involve an understanding of good in the past and present. Your definition is really a general ploy about knowing good and evil, and that contradicts the assertion that courage is about understanding only future events. Therefore, the definition must be false. The discussion ends in confusion.
He professed to knowing nothing about any subject, and his research took the form of asking questions, the so-called Socratic Dialogue. He would seek out the person seen as the most expert in a subject—for example, he would discuss bravery with soldiers—and then engage them in discussion. His technique was to use a line of questioning that exposed what they thought they knew was based on false assumptions.

In one such exchange, Socrates talks with Phaedrus, an aristocrat with an interest in mythology. Socrates asked if the gods knew everything. Phaedrus said that they must, because they are gods. Socrates then gets Phaedrus to agree that gods sometimes argue with each other about what is good or bad. That, says Socrates, means that one of the gods must be wrong on occasions and therefore cannot know everything.

Socrates came to the conclusion that the wisest men in Athens only thought they knew things—but like him, they knew nothing. The men of standing that he interrogated were invariably left confused and often offended by their encounter with Socrates. Socrates is said to have given special attention to the Sophists—teachers and rhetoricians—who charged for their services. To Socrates, they were frauds using clever words to pass on false knowledge. “There is only one good: knowledge; and only one evil: ignorance,” he explained. Branding the most eloquent people in Athens as evil, and by association all those who used their services as well, cannot have helped Socrates’s reputation among the ruling class of Athens.

Condemned to death
After many years of being a philosophical thorn in the sides of Athens’s elite, Socrates was put on trial. The charge was “corrupting the youth and not believing in the gods,” encouraging younger people to break with tradition and question their elders and betters. Everyone on all sides assumed Socrates would agree to end his one-man philosophical crusade, and retire quietly. However, Socrates refused, declaring, “The life which is unexamined is not worth living.” With that he chose a death sentence. According to Athens’s laws, this was suicide by poison, and Socrates willingly drank a fatal dose of hemlock.