Socrates

c.470–399BC
‘The only thing I know is that I know nothing’

Socrates lived through times of great political upheaval in his birthplace of Athens, a city which would eventually make him a scapegoat for its troubles and ultimately demand his life. Much of what is known about Socrates comes through the works of his one-time pupil Plato, for Socrates himself was an itinerant philosopher who taught solely by means of public discussion and oratory and never wrote any philosophical works of his own.

Unlike the Greek philosophers before him, Socrates was less concerned with abstract metaphysical ponderings than with practical questions of how we ought to live, and what the good life for man might be. Consequently, he is often hailed as the inventor of that branch of philosophy known as ethics. It is precisely his concern with ethical matters that often led him into conflict with the city elders, who accused him of corrupting the minds of the sons of the wealthy with revolutionary and unorthodox ideas.

Socrates was certainly a maverick, often claiming to the consternation of his interlocutors that the only thing he was sure of was his own ignorance. Indeed much of his teaching consisted in asking his audience to define various common ideas and notions, such as ‘beauty’, or ‘the good’, or ‘piety’, only to show through reasoned argument that all of the proposed definitions and common conceptions lead to paradox or absurdity. Some of his contemporaries thought this technique disingenuous, and that Socrates knew more than he let on. However, Socrates’ method was meant to provide salutary lessons in the dangers of uncritical acceptance of orthodoxy. He often railed against, and made dialectic victims of, those who claimed to have certain knowledge of some particular subject. It is chiefly through the influence of Socrates that philosophy developed into the modern discipline of continuous critical reflection. The greatest danger to both society and the individual, we learn from Socrates, is the suspension of critical thought.

Loved by the city’s aristocratic youth, Socrates inevitably developed many enemies throughout his lifetime. In his seventieth year, or thereabouts, after Athens had gone through several changes of leadership and a period of failing fortunes, Socrates was brought to trial on charges of ‘corrupting the youth’ and ‘not believing in the city gods’. It would seem that the charges were brought principally to persuade Socrates to renounce his provocative public speaking and convince the citizens of Athens that the new leadership had a tight rein on law and order. With a plea of guilty he might perhaps have walked away from the trial and lived out the rest of his life as a private citizen. However, in characteristic style, he robustly defended himself, haranguing his accusers and claiming that god himself had sent him on his mission to practice and teach philosophy. When asked, upon being found guilty, what penalty he thought he should receive, Socrates mocked the court by suggesting a trifling fine of only 30 minae. Outraged, a greater majority voted for Socrates to be put to death by the drinking of hemlock than had originally voted him guilty. Unperturbed, Socrates readily agreed to abide by the laws of his city and forbade his family and friends from asking for a stay of execution.

Socrates’ trial, death and final speeches are wonderfully captured by Plato in his dialogues Apology, Crito and Phaedo.