

The life and ideas of socrates



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The unexamined life is not worth living for the human being. These words, spoken by one of the most influential men to ever live, have resounded throughout millennia as the basis for all philosophical thought. Socrates' life played a major role in human history as it has influenced everyone from Plato, to Aristotle, and even Alexander the Great, showing its importance for us as humans living in an ever-changing world.

The life of Socrates fluctuated and evolved constantly, as his early years consisted mainly of education and early philosophical thought, but as he grew in wisdom and stature he found himself fighting in multiple battles during the Peloponnesian wars and saving the lives of powerful men. Sadly, his philosophical ideas were not widely accepted and his steadfastness to his own ideas eventually led to his execution. Socrates was born in Athens during the year 469 B. C. to Sophroniscus and Phaenarate, his father and mother respectively. The tribe his family associated with was Antiochis, while their Deme, or their district, was Alopece. Five days after his birth, Socrates' father followed the sacred tradition of carrying him around the hearth and accepting him into the family, naming him on the tenth day. Following his naming, Socrates was presented to his phratry and socialized into Athenian institutions necessary for the common male (Nails 09). As Socrates grew, he became more and more eager for schooling and was eventually incorporated into the sophisticated schooling system of Athens.

During Socrates' childhood, literacy became more widespread and education was becoming a necessity for a growing percentage of the Athenian population. Because of this, Sophroniscus ensured his son would receive an education on par with what was expected at the time, showing that Socrates'

upbringing was not deprived nor was it especially luscious. At a young age, Socrates was already purchasing the scrolls of Anaxagoras and educating himself in the ways of philosophical thought, planting the seeds of wisdom that would grow and influence generations to come. In his 18th year, Socrates' father put him through the ceremony of dokimasia, where he would be examined and entered onto the citizens' role. This made Socrates eligible for tasks of the Athenian government, meaning he needed to spend two years in compulsory military training. Unfortunately, soon after Socrates came of age, his father died, leaving Phaenarete (his mother) as his only legal guardian. Between this time and his 30th year, Socrates discussed philosophy with influential teachers of the time and trained himself in a trade in preparation for his coming eligibility for public office (Nails 09). Socrates' early years played a large part in the molding of the rest of his life, as his father's death played a profound effect on his moral development and his introduction to philosophy at such a young age allowed him to be deeply rooted and knowledgeable in it at just 19.

After Socrates completed his mandatory military training, he was sent to Potidaea in 432 with Alcibiades to put down a revolt as a foot soldier. Alcibiades, a commander during the Peloponnesian wars, was wounded and dying on the battlefield before being rescued by Socrates, who saved his life, armor, and honor. In the year 429, during a short stint in Athens between two battles, Socrates was accused by a comic playwright of aiding Euripides in writing his tragedies, a false accusation that harmed Socrates' reputation and would be repeated twice more. After travelling around the Balkan Peninsula once more to fight against revolts, the Greeks' luck began to dry

up and they were defeated in 424 during the Battle of Delium. Although there were many casualties, Socrates was still honored for his heroism in battle and was praised once again by his commander Alcibiades.

Unfortunately, the Athenians were defeated again at the Battle of Amphipolis in 422 and Socrates was of a small group that returned. This would be the last time Socrates would fight in any war (Nails 10).

After concluding his military career, Socrates began to teach the youths of Athens in the ways of philosophical thought and was held in high regards among them, yet he remained essentially anonymous from those who would be his peers. Unfortunately, any trace of this anonymity that was left in 423 was eliminated by the popularity he gained from being portrayed in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. Being placed in the spotlight was not something Socrates was used to, so this event ultimately resulted in the unrest that led to his execution. After the war time that followed 423, Socrates continued his talks on erotic love with the youths of Athens (these inspired Plato's *Symposium*) and eventually married Xanthippe, who soon after bore their first son Lamprocles. In the following years, they had another child named after Socrates' father, Sophroniscus. Following his family's development, a newly erected wrestling school became the setting for Socrates' examinations of the nature of friendship with a group of adolescents who associated with Plato and his older brothers. This association would soon be damaged as Aristophanes took another stab at Socrates' reputation, stating, It's no longer fashionable to associate with Socrates, and His hairsplitting twaddle ignores the craft of the tragedians! (Nails 12). This unrest eventually led to accusations of irreverence and Socrates was eventually found guilty

and executed. In his final hours, Socrates remained happy and energetic, drinking the Athenians' poison and dying with his honor.

Although Socrates himself never wrote down a word of his ideas and philosophies, his students (most notable of whom was Plato) ensured that the vast majority of his works were immortalized to ensure the world would see his genius. Because of this, we can today observe Socrates' ideas of the Socratic Method and the Socratic Paradox, two key aspects of the world of metaphysical thought. The Socratic Paradox, or the idea that the only thing man can know is that they know nothing, was uncovered by Socrates in a way one would only suspect from the iconic thinker. According to *The Story of Philosophy* by Bryan Magee, When the oracle at Delphi declared him to be the wisest of men, he thought this could mean only that he alone knew that he did not know anything, (Magee 20). Socrates uses this simple declaration from a fraudulent fortune teller to discover one of the most profound paradoxes of philosophy while in the process stemming from it the Socratic Method. The Socratic Method is the most popular of Socrates' main philosophies as it plays a part in almost any philosopher's ideological journey, and involves asking a series of questions to reach, what most would hope, an end (although this was rarely attained, as Socratic questioning commonly becomes circular).

Around ancient Athens, Socrates would question the legitimacy of fundamental concepts of livelihood and, according to the course text, challenge a person who thought they knew the answer, and then subject that answer to examination by asking the person a series of searching questions about it, (Magee 21). This questioning could delegitimize ideas thought to be

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the most concrete, as evidenced by the hatred produced from Socrates' questioning of Greek gods and eventual charges of irreverence. This invalidation of ideas would force both observers and those questioned to, according to Magee, retract [their] answer, or at least qualify it although that interlocuter "" had thought they knew what, let us say, courage was, actually they did not, (Magee 21). By exposing the great ignorance of the Athenians in this way, Socrates effectively opened the eyes of thousands of youths who would eventually carry on this way of thought, whether they be his students or simply avid listeners. These ideas formulated by Socrates have resounded throughout millennia and have an undoubtedly profound effect on today's society.

Socrates' influence has stretched from his lifetime to today, and his ideas are still applied in modern thought and philosophy. By asking the deep-seated questions of life, Socrates was able to make humans really contemplate the meaning of their existence like never before and encourage a new way of thinking on a subject scrutinized since the beginning of human existence. The implication these ideas hold for us today is that we must accept the reality that there is no answer to the question, What is the meaning of life? but there are rationalizations for our existence. By asking, What makes things good? What is virtue? What is love? we can discover, through the Socratic method, why we're here. Interestingly enough, the answer for these questions changes from person to person, each with their own respective question that carries them on to the next, eventually resulting in the eventual realization that all truths are subjective except one, that it is impossible for us to know anything definitely.

Socrates' inspiration throughout thousands of years has played a profound effect on human history and has molded cultures around the world for the better. In the constantly evolving world in which we live, having a grasp on the meaning of our existence grows in importance every day as daily trials become greater and more difficult to deal with. Although Socrates life ended before the modern calendar even began, his influence has remained and his ideologies have been immortalized by those who stood alongside him.