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The Man Who Asked Questions

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46 About 2,400 years ago in Athens a man was put to death for asking too many questions. There were philosophers before him, but it was with Socrates that the subject really took off. If philosophy has a patron saint, it is Socrates.

Snub-nosed, podgy, shabby and a bit strange, Socrates did not fit in. Although physically ugly and often unwashed, he had great charisma and a brilliant mind. Everyone in Athens agreed that there had never been anyone quite like him and probably wouldn't be again. He was unique. But he was also extremely annoying. He saw himself as one of those horseflies that have a nasty bite – a gadfly. They're irritating, but don't do serious harm. Not everyone in Athens agreed, though. Some loved him; others thought him a dangerous influence.

As a young man he had been a brave soldier fighting in the Peloponnesian wars against the Spartans and their allies. In middle age he shuffled around the marketplace, stopping

people from time to time and asking them awkward questions. That was more or less all he did. But the questions he asked were razor-sharp. They seemed straightforward; but they weren't.

An example of this was his conversation with Euthydemus. Socrates asked him whether being deceitful counted as being immoral. Of course it does, Euthydemus replied. He thought that was obvious. But what, Socrates asked, if your friend is feeling very low and might kill himself, and you steal his knife? Isn't that a deceitful act? Of course it is. But isn't it *moral* rather than *immoral* to do that? It's a good thing, not a bad one – despite being a deceitful act. Yes, says Euthydemus, who by now is tied in knots. Socrates by using a clever counter-example has shown that Euthydemus' general comment that being deceitful is immoral doesn't apply in every situation. Euthydemus hadn't realized this before.

Over and over again Socrates demonstrated that the people he met in the marketplace didn't really know what they thought they knew. A military commander would begin a conversation totally confident that he knew what 'courage' meant, but after twenty minutes in Socrates' company would leave completely confused. The experience must have been disconcerting. Socrates loved to reveal the limits of what people genuinely understood, and to question the assumptions on which they built their lives. A conversation that ended in everyone realizing how little they knew was for him a success. Far better that than to carry on believing that you understood something when you didn't.

At that time in Athens the sons of rich men would be sent to study with Sophists. The Sophists were clever teachers who would coach their students in the art of speech-making. They charged very high fees for this. Socrates in contrast didn't

charge for his services. In fact he claimed he didn't know anything, so how could he teach at all? This didn't stop students coming to him and listening in on his conversations. It didn't make him popular with the Sophists either.

One day his friend Chaerophon went to the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. The oracle was a wise old woman, a sibyl, who would answer questions that visitors asked. Her answers were usually in the form of a riddle. 'Is anyone wiser than Socrates?' Chaerophon asked. 'No,' came the answer. 'No one is wiser than Socrates.'

When Chaerophon told Socrates about this he didn't believe it at first. It really puzzled him. 'How can I be the wisest man in Athens when I know so little?' he wondered. He devoted years to questioning people to see if anyone was wiser than he was. Finally he realized what the oracle had meant and that she had been right. Lots of people were good at the various things they did – carpenters were good at carpentry, and soldiers knew about fighting. But none of them were truly wise. They didn't really know what they were talking about.

The word 'philosopher' comes from the Greek words meaning 'love of wisdom'. The Western tradition in philosophy, the one that this book follows, spread from Ancient Greece across large parts of the world, at time cross-fertilized by ideas from the East. The kind of wisdom that it values is based on argument, reasoning and asking questions, not on believing things simply because someone important has told you they are true. Wisdom for Socrates was not knowing lots of facts, or knowing how to do something. It meant understanding the true nature of our existence, including the limits of what we can know. Philosophers today are doing more or less what Socrates was doing: asking tough questions, looking at reasons and evidence, struggling to answer some of the most important questions we can ask

ourselves about the nature of reality and how we should live. Unlike Socrates, though, modern philosophers have the benefit of nearly two and a half thousand years of philosophical thinking to build on. This book examines ideas of some of the key thinkers writing in this tradition of Western thought, a tradition that Socrates started.

What made Socrates so wise was that he kept asking questions and he was always willing to debate his ideas. Life, he declared, is only worth living if you think about what you are doing. An unexamined existence is all right for cattle, but not for human beings.

Unusually for a philosopher, Socrates refused to write anything down. For him talking was far better than writing. Written words can't answer back; they can't explain anything to you when you don't understand them. Face-to-face conversation was much better, he maintained. In conversation we can take into account the kind of person we are talking to; we can adapt what we say so that the message gets across. Because he refused to write, it's mainly through the work of Socrates' star pupil Plato that we have much idea of what this great man believed and argued about. Plato wrote down a series of conversations between Socrates and the people he questioned. These are known as the Platonic Dialogues and are great works of literature as well as of philosophy – in some ways Plato was the Shakespeare of his day. Reading these dialogues, we get a sense of what Socrates was like, how clever he was and how infuriating.

Actually it isn't even as straightforward as that, as we can't always tell whether Plato was writing down what Socrates really said, or whether he was putting ideas into the mouth of the character he calls 'Socrates', ideas which are Plato's own.

One of the ideas that most people believe is Plato's rather than Socrates' is that the world is not at all as it seems. There is

a significant difference between appearance and reality. Most of us mistake appearances for reality. We think we understand, but we don't. Plato believed that only philosophers understand what the world is truly like. They discover the nature of reality by thinking rather than relying on their senses.

To make this point, Plato described a cave. In that imaginary cave there are people chained facing a wall. In front of them they can see flickering shadows that they believe are real things. They aren't. What they see are shadows made by objects held up in front of a fire behind them. These people spend their whole lives thinking that the shadows projected on the wall are the real world. Then one of them breaks free from his chains and turns towards the fire. His eyes are blurry at first, but then he starts to see where he is. He stumbles out of the cave and eventually is able to look at the sun. When he comes back to the cave, no one believes what he has to tell them about the world outside. The man who breaks free is like a philosopher. He sees beyond appearances. Ordinary people have little idea about reality because they are content with looking at what's in front of them rather than thinking deeply about it. But the appearances are deceptive. What they see are shadows, not reality.

This story of the cave is connected with what's come to be known as Plato's Theory of Forms. The easiest way to understand this is through an example. Think of all the circles that you have seen in your life. Was any one of them a perfect circle? No. Not one of them was absolutely perfect. In a perfect circle every point on its circumference is exactly the same distance from the centre point. Real circles never quite achieve this. But you understood what I meant when I used the words 'perfect circle'. So what is that perfect circle? Plato would say that the idea of a perfect circle is the Form of a circle. If you want to understand what a circle is, you should focus on the Form of the

circle, not actual circles that you can draw and experience through your visual sense, all of which are imperfect in some way. Similarly, Plato thought, if you want to understand what goodness is, then you need to concentrate on the Form of goodness, not on particular examples of it that you witness. Philosophers are the people who are best suited to thinking about the Forms in this abstract way; ordinary people get led astray by the world as they grasp it through their senses.

Because philosophers are good at thinking about reality, Plato believed they should be in charge and have all the political power. In *The Republic*, his most famous work, he described an imaginary perfect society. Philosophers would be at the top and would get a special education; but they would sacrifice their own pleasures for the sake of the citizens they ruled. Beneath them would be soldiers who were trained to defend the country, and beneath *them* would be the workers. These three groups of people would be in a perfect balance, Plato thought, a balance that was like a well-balanced mind with the reasonable part keeping the emotions and desires in control. Unfortunately his model of society was profoundly anti-democratic, and would keep the people under control by a combination of lies and force. He would have banned most art, on the grounds that he thought it gave false representations of reality. Painters paint appearances, but appearances are deceptive about the Forms. Every aspect of life in Plato's ideal republic would be strictly controlled from above. It's what we would now call a totalitarian state. Plato thought that letting the people vote was like letting the passengers steer a ship – far better to let people who knew what they were doing take charge.

Fifth-century Athens was quite different from the society that Plato imagined in *The Republic*. It was a democracy of sorts, though only about 10 per cent of the population could vote.

Women and slaves, for example, were automatically excluded. But citizens were equal before the law, and there was an elaborate lottery system to make sure that everyone had a fair chance of influencing political decisions.

Athens as a whole didn't value Socrates as highly as Plato valued him. Far from it. Many Athenians felt that Socrates was dangerous and was deliberately undermining the government. In 399 BC, when Socrates was 70 years old, one of them, Meletus, took him to court. He claimed that Socrates was neglecting the Athenian gods, introducing new gods of his own. He also suggested that Socrates was teaching the young men of Athens to behave badly, encouraging them to turn against the authorities. These were both very serious accusations. It is difficult to know now how accurate they were. Perhaps Socrates really did discourage his students from following the state religion, and there is some evidence that he enjoyed mocking Athenian democracy. That would have been consistent with his character. What is certainly true is that many Athenians believed the charges.

They voted on whether or not he was guilty. Just over half of the 501 citizens who made up the huge jury thought he was, and sentenced him to death. If he'd wanted to, he could probably have talked his way out of being executed. But instead, true to his reputation as a gadfly, he annoyed the Athenians even more by arguing that he had done nothing wrong and that they should, in fact, be rewarding him by giving him free meals for life instead of punishing him. That didn't go down well.

He was put to death by being forced to drink poison made from hemlock, a plant that gradually paralyses the body. Socrates said goodbye to his wife and three sons, and then gathered his students around him. If he had the choice to carry on living quietly, not asking any more difficult questions, he would not

take it. He'd rather die than that. He had an inner voice that told him to keep questioning everything, and he could not betray it. Then he drank the cup of poison. Very soon he was dead.

In Plato's dialogues, though, Socrates lives on. This difficult man, who kept asking questions and would rather die than stop thinking about how things really are, has been an inspiration for philosophers ever since.

Socrates' immediate impact was on those around him. Plato carried on teaching in the spirit of Socrates after his teacher's death. By far his most impressive pupil was Aristotle, a very different sort of thinker from either of them.

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