

1 Introduction: Socratic questions

Socrates was the first to summon philosophy down from the heavens, to have her take her place in cities and lead her even into our homes, and to compel her to investigate life and character and good and evil.

(Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5.10)

The questions Socrates asks

Most philosophers are remembered mainly for their conclusions. Socrates is remembered above all for his questions, for his way of pursuing philosophy. Hence it is fitting that most people have heard of the Socratic method, even if they can't name a philosophical position Socrates held – and even if, as we shall learn, the phrase 'Socratic method' is often used today in a sense Socrates himself would have rejected (see the text box on pp. 93–4). Socrates' questions matter so much because, as the Roman **Cicero** (106–43) notes in the quotation above, they brought philosophy home. Socrates' greatest student, **Plato** (c. 429–347) has a prominent Athenian general remark on the impact of Socratic questioning.

NICIAS I don't think you understand what must happen whenever anyone comes into close contact with Socrates and gets into a conversation with him. Even if conversation starts off on some other topic, it never ends until Socrates argues him around to having to account not only for the way he lives his life now but for the life he has led before. Once this starts, Socrates will not let him off the hook until he has put everything about him well and truly to the test.

(Plato, *Laches* 187e–188b)

And Socrates wasn't content with just any sort of answer to these probing questions. He wasn't looking to discuss famous exemplary people, heroes of Greek myth or Greek history, nor was he willing to stop once he'd identified individual actions that were particularly admirable. He demanded clear *definitions* of the characteristic traits of a good person, the **virtues**. And he wasn't content with mere dictionary definitions: he wanted definitions that explained what these qualities really are. He was confident that the virtuous person would have a good life, and that the knowledge expressed by accurate definitions was an essential ingredient, and perhaps the only essential ingredient, in virtue.

Socrates never found fully satisfactory answers to his questions. But this lessened neither his commitment to the pursuit of virtue nor his resolve to do what virtue, inasmuch as he understood it, demanded that he do. Thus Socrates' recognition

of the limits of human wisdom did not lead him to moral relativism, but was part of his distinctive commitment to morality. There is something particularly appealing about this mixture of intellectual and moral integrity.

But not all people found, or find, Socrates appealing. You may not. Many students, and among them some of the most thoughtful, initially find Socrates more annoying than enlightening. This brings us to the other thing that most people know about Socrates: his trial. He was executed in 399, at the age of 70, by his home city, Athens, the world's first democracy. Much about that trial, as we will learn, is uncertain and controversial. But Plato has Socrates attribute the Athenians' hatred of him to his habit of asking difficult questions (see *Apology* 23a–24b on pp. 42–6). Socrates had an intensely annoying habit of demanding that prominent people explain themselves, and then making it all too clear that those people did not really know what they thought they knew. Thus the same thing that made Socrates so influential in his own day, and that has kept people talking about him for all the centuries since he died, led him to his death.

Socrates himself wrote nothing – until, perhaps, a poem or two when he was awaiting his execution in jail, as Plato reports at *Phaedo* 61b. We must therefore rely on other sources to learn about him. Before going any farther, then, it will be best to consider each of those sources in turn.

Our sources for Socrates

Aristophanes

Aristophanes (c. 455–386) was the leading comic playwright of his day. Socrates is the central figure in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. This play takes its title, like many ancient comedies, from its chorus; in our play the clouds are goddesses worshipped by a Socrates who is unwilling to recognize any of the traditional gods. The play was put on in 423 BC, but placed third in the three-way competition that year. Aristophanes revised the script, and it is this revised script that we have, though Aristophanes never staged this edition.

The protagonist of the play is an elderly Athenian named Strepsiades, who turns to Socrates in hopes of learning how to argue his way out of his debts. Socrates isn't really interested in teaching Strepsiades what Strepsiades wants to learn, and gives up on him after spouting various comic versions of contemporary scientific lore and then failing to teach him ridiculous bits of Greek grammar.

After Strepsiades drops out, his son, Pheidippides, learns rather more in Socrates' school. We see that the school is inhabited by a pair of personified arguments, Right and Wrong, who showcase their debating skills, and their morality and immorality, to allow Pheidippides to choose which he will study under (lines 889–1104). Right stands for good old-fashioned Athenian values, but isn't exactly quick on his feet, and is something of a lecherous old man. Wrong boasts of his

ability to teach you how to argue your way out of any fix. And he wins the debate. Pheidippides vanishes into Socrates' school, and when he reappears he has been so well trained that he can prove to his father that it is perfectly fine to beat not only your father but your mother. Strepsiades, outraged, burns down Socrates' school.

By introducing the characters Right and Wrong, Aristophanes distances Socrates from the most subversive arguments in the play. But while Socrates himself does not make such arguments in his own voice, the audience no doubt was meant to associate him with Wrong's arguments. And Aristophanes' Socrates is certainly impious; as we'll see, in *Clouds*, line 367, he brazenly claims that there is no such thing as Zeus (quoted on p. 22). No wonder that the jury at Socrates' trial in 399 remembered the Socrates from the play, and not fondly.

Scholars are divided on whether or not Aristophanes meant the *Clouds* as an attack on Socrates in particular or instead used him as a sort of poster-child for everything Aristophanes found ridiculous or dangerous about contemporary intellectuals. In Plato's *Apology* (19d, pp. 34–5), Socrates simply denies that he knows anything at all about the sort of natural philosophy he is associated with in the *Clouds*. But, as we will soon see (pp. 22–3), there are hints elsewhere in our sources that Socrates did indeed have some interest in such matters. And Aristophanes' attack on Socrates may be more subtle than the jokes would lead us to believe. Aristophanes' Socrates is not so much immoral as amoral: he casts doubt on traditional morality but fails to replace it with anything else. Aristophanes was a comic playwright, not an intellectual historian, and so certainly was not overly concerned with portraying Socrates accurately. But for his parody to have the greatest impact, it would have to be directed at Socrates rather than at some artificial composite intellectual.

An ancient anecdote has it that when non-Athenians at the original performance of the *Clouds* were wondering who this Socrates fellow was, Socrates himself stood up and then remained standing throughout the whole play (Aelian, *Varia Historia* 2.13). By standing up Socrates answered the question of the non-Athenians, but by remaining standing he may have raised another question, especially for the Athenians in the audience: am I really the outrageous fool that Aristophanes presents me as?

Plato

Plato (c. 429–347) came from a wealthy family that was active in Athenian politics. During his teens and twenties he was one of the young men who associated with Socrates. Around 383 he founded an informal school that was called the Academy, as that was the name of the public gymnasium complex at which Plato and his students met. The Academy would offer varied interpretations of Plato's philosophical legacy for almost 300 years, until the sack of Athens by the Romans in 86.

Plato was still more influential as an author. Almost all of his writings are dialogues featuring historical characters in conversation with Socrates, and many of these conversations are given fairly exact dates and settings. Socrates and his contemporaries come vividly to life in Plato's writing, tempting us to believe that we are overhearing Socrates' very words. But Plato's dialogues are not straightforward evidence for the historical Socrates. Ancient readers would not have expected Plato to give word-for-word accounts of actual conversations: in antiquity, even historians were given leeway to present historical characters giving speeches that were substantially composed or at least revised by the historians themselves. And the philosophy expounded in Plato's dialogues varies widely. Plato's thinking presumably developed over his long career, and it is natural to assume that, over time, his ideas came to diverge more and more from those of Socrates. Thus, at least in some of his later dialogues, Plato puts his own ideas into Socrates' mouth, ideas that would never have occurred to Socrates himself.

If we knew which dialogues Plato wrote when, we'd have a good idea of where to begin our attempt to disentangle Socrates' ideas from those of Plato. But we have no direct evidence for the publication dates of Plato's dialogues, and references to datable external events in the dialogues are relatively rare. We must therefore rely mainly on internal signs in the dialogues themselves, and above all on changes in Plato's style. Scholars have diligently studied Plato's style for well over a hundred years, employing a set of techniques known as '**stylometry**'. Such techniques study the linguistic habits of an author, and how they vary over time. Stylometric analysis allows us to outline the broad development of Plato's style, and to group Plato's works into three periods, naturally enough labelled early, middle, and late. The consensus view is that while at least some of Plato's early works give a fairly accurate picture of Socrates' thought, the middle and late dialogues for the most part reflect Plato's own and rather different philosophy.

Plato's dialogues

The chart opposite groups the works of Plato solely on stylistic criteria; within each group, the dialogues are listed in alphabetical order. When a dialogue's title is preceded by one asterisk, Socrates is present but in a subordinate role; when it is preceded by two asterisks, Socrates is absent. Dialogues whose titles are put in brackets are those that many scholars doubt were written by Plato.

Early dialogues <i>[Alcibiades]</i> <i>Apology</i> <i>Charmides</i> <i>[Clitophon]</i> <i>Cratylus</i> <i>Crito</i> <i>Euthydemus</i> <i>Euthyphro</i> <i>Gorgias</i> <i>Hippias Major</i> <i>Ion</i> <i>Laches</i> <i>Hippias Minor</i> <i>Lysis</i> <i>Menexenus</i> <i>Meno</i> <i>Phaedo</i> <i>Protagoras</i> <i>Symposium</i> <i>[Theages]</i>	Major topic(s) Self-knowledge Socrates' defence speech (entire work in chapter 2) Moderation (<i>sōphrosynē</i>) Socrates' failure to do more than exhort Etymology Whether Socrates should escape from jail Sophistic puzzles (excerpt in chapter 5) Piety Rhetoric and virtue (excerpt in chapter 5) Beauty Poetry Courage (the majority is found in chapter 3) The liar versus the truthful man Friendship An oration for Athenian war dead Virtue and knowledge Socrates' death and the immortality of the soul The unity of virtue; pleasure as the good A dinner party conversation about love Socrates' divine sign
Middle dialogues * <i>Parmenides</i> <i>Phaedrus</i> <i>Republic</i> <i>Theaetetus</i>	Major topic(s) Plato's forms and Parmenides' 'One' Rhetoric and love Justice and the ideal city Knowledge
Late dialogues * <i>Critias</i> ** <i>Laws</i> <i>Philebus</i> * <i>Politicus</i> * <i>Sophist</i> * <i>Timaeus</i>	Major topic(s) Atlantis A second-best city Pleasure Defining the true statesman Dividing sophistry from philosophy A divine craftsman's creation of the world

The stylistic evidence, alas, only takes us so far. Plato may have revised works over years, complicating dating based on stylistic criteria. The *Republic* is a major case in point: many believe that the first book of the *Republic* (the equivalent of a modern chapter) was written years before the later books, and should count as an early dialogue, while the remaining nine books were written later. And there are major differences in philosophical content even among the works dated early on stylistic grounds. Scholars have attempted to come up with a more refined dating scheme for the early dialogues by producing a subset of ‘transitional dialogues’, so-called because they make the transition from more Socratic early dialogues to the middle dialogues in which Plato introduces his own original ideas. But stylometry does not provide firm evidence for sorting the dialogues within these groups, and no one arrangement of these early dialogues has ever commanded a consensus.

Aristotle (384–322), who was a member of Plato’s Academy from 367 until Plato’s death in 347, provides us with further evidence for isolating the historical elements in Plato’s portrayal of Socrates. Aristotle tells us that while Socrates sought definitions of ethical terms, Socrates, unlike Plato, did not develop a full-blown theory of forms (*Metaphysics* 13.4, 1078b29–30). In Plato’s theory of forms, universals like justice are said to have a separate existence which transcends their involvement in individual just people or just actions in the physical world. Aristotle thus believed that he could distinguish between the historical Socrates, who sought definitions but not Platonic forms, and the Socrates in Plato’s later dialogues, who presents Plato’s own philosophy. Today almost all scholars think that Aristotle was right to deny that Socrates developed the theory of forms, but many scholars argue that Aristotle knew nothing about Socrates other than what he read in Plato. If this is true, Aristotle provides no *independent* evidence for Socrates; we can read Plato just as well as he could. But it is at least some comfort that the traditional approach to Plato – that taking him as first reporting Socrates’ thought, then developing his own – is in keeping with the way that Plato’s greatest student, Aristotle, interpreted his own teacher.

Platonic silence and Socratic irony

There is yet another difficulty with identifying the historical Socrates in Plato. In his dialogues, Plato never says anything in his own voice. Hence Plato never tells us what he thought Socrates believed. And while Socrates is the main character in all of Plato’s early dialogues, Socrates does not simply report his beliefs and arguments: he engages in lively conversations with a varied cast of conversation partners (**interlocutors**). Plato’s Socrates is sometimes passionately argumentative, but just as often he is playfully ironic, and most of the time he is a questioner rather than a lecturer. We must interpret what he says in its dramatic setting. Hence what one scholar interprets as Plato changing his mind over time another will chalk up to a different dramatic context.

Even when Plato's Socrates makes a statement rather than asking a question he is often ironical. **Socratic irony** takes a multitude of forms. Often he employs mock praise to ridicule pompous interlocutors; sometimes he seems to ironically overstate the extent of his own ignorance. When Socrates speaks ironically, he may mean the opposite of what he is saying, or merely something different from what he is saying, or he may even both mean and not mean what he is saying, just in different senses. Irony is so important that the most influential scholar of Socrates in the second half of the twentieth century, Gregory Vlastos, gave it prominent play in the title of his major work on Socrates, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Vlastos himself was confident that he could analyse and understand Socratic irony in a way that allowed him to draw firm conclusions about Socrates' moral philosophy. But many others have been rather less certain.

To top it all off, Plato has Socrates claim that writing itself is nothing serious, but is best considered a form of play, far inferior to direct oral conversation, and best suited to remind people of things they already know (*Phaedrus* 277d). Certainly Plato's works are playful literary masterpieces, and their complex literary form complicates a straightforward philosophical or historical interpretation.

Xenophon

Xenophon (c. 430–c. 355), like Plato, was an aristocratic Athenian who knew Socrates as a young man. Xenophon left Athens in 401 and was subsequently exiled from Athens, to return only late in his life, if he ever did. He thus missed Socrates' trial and death in 399, and was not present in Athens during the years Plato and others were discussing Socrates there. But Xenophon was not isolated in exile, and clearly read widely in the Socratic literature that was springing up in the first decades of the fourth century. Among many other works, he wrote four on Socrates.

The most substantial of these is his *Memorabilia* (*Recollections*), a lengthy defence of Socrates that aims to show not only that Socrates was innocent of the formal charges against him, but that he was in fact the most useful adviser, teacher, and friend a man could have. Xenophon's *Apology* gives a brief account of Socrates' deliberations before his trial, his speech at the trial, and some remarks he made subsequently. His *Symposium* (*Dinner Party*), which is pretty clearly a response to Plato's work of the same name, culminates in a long speech in which Socrates argues that love between men should remain unconsummated. Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* (*Estate Manager*) begins with a conversation in which Socrates critiques the conventional understanding of wealth, but then turns to Socrates' lengthy conversation with a most conventional Athenian gentleman, who gives him many a practical lesson on how to run a country estate profitably. Scholars are divided on whether this odd work shows Xenophon putting his own conventional ideas into Socrates' mouth, or is Xenophon's subtle attempt to contrast conventional views with Socratic ones.

We possess even less information for the dating of Xenophon's works than we have for those of Plato. But Xenophon's Socratic works were probably written after Plato's early dialogues, and indeed after much of the early Socratic literature. This needn't mean, however, that Xenophon was simply reworking these works and contributing nothing of his own. Rather, Xenophon often 'corrects' his sources, on the basis of his own understanding of Socrates. Hence in his *Symposium* Xenophon more clearly responds to the charge that Socrates sexually corrupted his youthful companions than Plato's Socrates does. And Xenophon's *Apology* makes it clear that Socrates believed that the time had come for him to die, which explains his uncompromising stance in the courtroom. Xenophon is first and foremost a defender of Socrates; he does not examine Socrates' ideas for their philosophical value, but articulates them while defending Socrates. And his Socrates is not so much an inquirer as a mentor. He spends far less energy in pursuit of the definition of key moral terms, and far more time dispensing moral advice.

The so-called Minor Socratics

Xenophon and Plato were not the only people writing works on Socrates in the decades after his death, but the works of the others survive only in fragments. Among the more important of these 'minor Socratics' was **Antisthenes** (c. 446–c. 365), who argued that virtue was sufficient for the good life, and rejected pleasure. Antisthenes was considered the inspiration behind the philosophical movement known as Cynicism, whose adherents preached that we ought to live austere and even primitively, in accord with nature. At the other end of the spectrum was **Aristippus** (c. 440–?), who argued that pleasure was the end we should aim at; we shall meet him in chapter 4. The wide divergence between these two followers of Socrates reveals something about the open-ended nature of Socrates' philosophy.

The Socratic Question

It is, then, difficult to find the real Socrates in any one of our sources. Aristophanes' Socrates has been taken to be a comic caricature; Plato's Socrates morphs into Plato; and Xenophon's Socrates has been taken to be a front for Xenophon. And while something can be gained from comparing our sources – Xenophon's Socrates, for example, obviously has far more in common with the Socrates of the early dialogues than with the figure from later Plato – the differences between our sources are so great as to lead many to despair of resolving them.

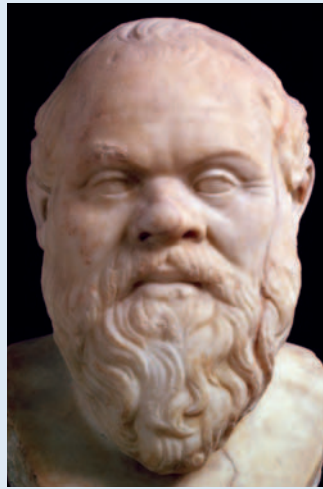
So who was Socrates? Today most scholars have abandoned the effort to answer this question, which has been debated so long that it has gained capital letter status as **The Socratic Question**. They emphasize differences between our sources rather than attempting to get behind these differences to identify the original, historical Socrates. This approach is prudent and productive. Aristophanes' Socrates, Plato's Socratic dialogues, and the Socratic works of Xenophon are all clearly worth studying in their own right.

But this approach is also unfortunate. Socrates matters, as we have seen, in some large part because of the life he led, a life which led him to his fatal encounter with the Athenian legal system. If we cannot study the historical Socrates but can only study him as a fictional character in this or that author, we've lost much of importance. And the decision to give up on the historical Socrates has sometimes been based on the view that we must dismiss our sources as 'fictional' – as if classifying a work as fiction proves that it can contain nothing historical. No one of our sources was dedicated solely to an accurate presentation of the historical Socrates. But, like students of other aspects of ancient history, we don't need to simply choose one source to trust and then follow it blindly. Nor need we despair when our sources disagree. Some disagreements are only apparent. And where disagreements are real and substantial, we can take into account the intentions of each author and make a reasoned attempt to say which is more in keeping with the rest of what we know about Socrates.

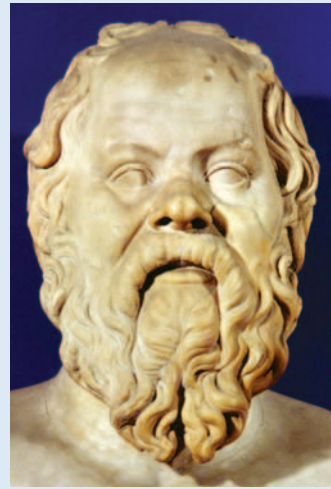
Socrates the satyr



Satyr



Socrates type A



Socrates type B

From left to right: satyr from a bronze offering jug, c. 325 BC; marble bust, Roman copy of Greek statue probably dating to early 4th century; marble bust, Roman copy of Greek original of the later 4th century.

We are blessed with so many ancient depictions of Socrates that we think we know what he looked like. We may be wrong. In Socrates' day sculptors were not interested in making realistic portraits. Socrates' portrait was based on his supposed resemblance to a **satyr** (or **silenus**), a mythological creature that took the form of a man with the ears and tail of a horse or goat. So the model for ancient images of Socrates was not so much Socrates himself as a mythological creature he was thought to resemble. The comparison to a satyr was hardly flattering; satyrs are most often shown drinking wine and engaged in various sexual escapades in the company of the god of wine, Dionysus.

Plato and Xenophon discussed Socrates' appearance in characteristically different ways. In his *Symposium*, Plato has **Alcibiades** compare Socrates to a musical satyr, Marsyas: Socrates' words, like the music of Marsyas, were capable of moving men. And Socrates resembled little statues of satyrs which could be opened to reveal treasures within (Plato, *Symposium* 215b–d). For Plato's Alcibiades, Socrates remains strange and even otherworldly: he can be compared to no other man, only to a creature of myth, and no one would guess at the inner beauty hidden within his ugly exterior. Xenophon has Socrates argue that his features are beautiful because they are functional: his bulging eyes allow him to see in all directions, and the nostrils of his snub nose allow him to smell in all directions (Xenophon, *Symposium* 5.5–5.6). While Xenophon's Socrates likely made this argument tongue in cheek, the emphasis on practicality is typical of Xenophon. Thus both Xenophon and Plato tried, in very different ways, to come to terms with Socrates' challenge to the Greek ideal of *kalokagathia*, 'beautiful goodness', the notion that external beauty reflects inner beauty. (For more on the assumed correspondence between beauty and moral worth, see the note at *Apology* 20b, p. 36.)

Type A portraits of Socrates are thought to derive from a statue commissioned by friends of Socrates and made soon after his death; likenesses deriving from this statue show Socrates with decidedly non-ideal features, by classical standards, in which a mature man would certainly not have a snub nose nor have lost his hair. This statue probably was meant to be provocative: just as Socrates himself refused to accept traditional Athenian values, so too his statue defiantly showed a man whose features did not conform to the idealized norm of his day. Later in the fourth century Socrates was no longer a controversial contemporary, but one of the great men of the past, and his features came to more closely resemble those of an idealized elderly citizen. Note how the fuller hair and beard soften his features in the **type B** bust; there are further signs of age as well, marking him as more human than mythological. Thus both types reflect the intentions of artists that go well beyond accurate representation. The Socratic Question applies to images as well as texts.

- If your college, school or town were going to sponsor a statue of Socrates, which of these two types would you prefer, and why?

Socrates and Athens

Socrates and history

Socrates was born in 469 BC. During his childhood Athens developed into what scholars call a 'radical democracy', a direct participatory democracy in which all adult male citizens were allowed and encouraged to participate in government, and even subsidized with pay for serving as jurors and in other official positions.