

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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. . . and if I say again that the greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, and that the life which is unexamined is not worth living - that you are still less likely to believe. And yet what I say is true, although a thing of which it is hard for me to persuade you. —**Plato's Socrates**

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“THE BRAVEST, WISEST, MOST JUST  
MAN OF ALL WE KNOW.”

Leo Rosten



**TIME:** 399 B.C.

**PLACE:** Athens

**COURT:** Council of 500

**CHARGES:** Impiety and Treason

**DEFENDANT:** Socrates

**H**e was 70 years old—squat, potbellied and baldheaded, with an absurd pug nose and an unkempt beard. Even in winter, he wore nothing but a cloak—no shoes, no shirt, no underwear. He had the merriest of dispositions; no one had ever seen him angry or petty or unkind. He was very brave: he had served as a foot soldier in four battles.

He was a philosopher. He did nothing but talk—talk to anyone who would listen to him, in the streets and harbor and market-places, discussing philosophy, which means everything under the sun, with students or sailors or tradesmen, questioning men about what they believed in, and why—always why—and how they could prove it. He punched holes in every argument; he dissected the big, grand words that come lightly to the tongue, words like justice, freedom, wisdom and reality. He met every answer with a new question, and each answer after that with another question, and yet another, and another, until a man's head was ready to burst. He made what seemed obvious seem preposterous because he demolished the comforting clichés by which most of us live. No subject, however hallowed, escaped his antiseptic analysis, or the withering fire of his cross-examination. He was brilliant, profound—and infuriating.

Some Athenians called him a crackpot (he had once remained transfixed in thought for 24 hours), a dangerous idler who did nothing but engage “in irony and jest on mankind.” The Oracle at Delphi had called him the wisest man alive, but Socrates, with his customary cool skepticism, sighed that his wisdom lay only in this: that unlike other men, he knew how great was his ignorance.

He refused to accept a penny for teaching. Indeed, he denied that he could ever teach anyone anything; he said he only exhorted men to think, to think so hard and so stubbornly that they could surmount illusion and falsity and glittering nonsense. Virtue, he said, is knowledge. Morals, he said, must be rooted in reason.

Athens was in the throes of adversity. Socrates' friend Alcibiades had betrayed the Athenians to the warrior-state of Sparta. Another friend, Critias, had led a brief reign of terror after Sparta's victory. And now Socrates' enemies cried that it was his endless, damnable hairsplitting and paradoxes that were undermining respect for democracy itself. They said he was so clever that “he made the weaker argument defeat the stronger,” that he made young minds doubt, if not mock, everything from the sacred mysteries to the established order. This meddlesome, sardonic prattler was clearly subversive—“denying the gods recognized by the state” and “corrupting the young.” And these, in fact, were the exact charges for which he was now on trial.

How did he defend himself? “I owe a greater obedience to God than to you, gentlemen,” he said. “So long as I draw breath, I shall never stop elucidating the truth before everyone I meet, asking, ‘Are you not ashamed to pursue money . . . and give no thought to

truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?' I shall not alter my conduct even if I must die a hundred deaths. For God has appointed me to act the gadfly . . . Death does not matter; what matters is that I should do no wrong."

They voted him guilty. The prosecutor demanded the death penalty. Under the law of Athens, it was now for the defendant to propose an alternative. Socrates could suggest that he be exiled; he knew the Council would leap to accept the compromise. Instead, he proposed that the government reward him—for urging Athenians to search for truth. "Some of you will say, 'But surely, Socrates, you can mind your own business?' But I cannot. "Life unexamined is not worth living."

Angered by his intractability, the Council condemned him to death. To which Socrates replied, "I have refused to address you in the way which would have flattered you, repenting, weeping, throwing myself on your sympathy, saying things I consider unworthy. For I would rather die as the result of the defense I made than live as the result of the other . . . Nothing can harm a good man, in life or in death . . . Now it is time to go—I to die and you to live; which of us is the happier is not known to anyone but God."

His frantic friends arranged to smuggle him out of prison, but he refused to escape the price a man must pay for refusing to compromise his values. When his wife Xantippe broke into hysterics in the death cell, he sent her and his sons away. He spent his last hours discussing, with undiminished delight, the problems that had always intrigued him: good and evil; ethics and honor and duty; how the senses can deceive us; what ennobles man and what demeans him; how to test the truth of a proposition, or prove a point, or expose a lazy assumption or a pat conclusion. When his disciples saw the dignity with which he drank the cup of hemlock, they wept. . . The poison paralyzed his limbs and reached his heart.

This frog-eyed, incorruptible man, this man who pestered everyone by asking, "Why?" "How do you know?" "What is the evidence?", this man who forced men to use their brains, this man who was obsessed with reason and driven by a passion for inquiry, this man who mocked hokum and annihilated platitudes, who fought ignorance and easy answers—this Socrates launched a revolution in human history. He dared enthrone reason above tradition. He taught men the marvelous victories that can be won by the free mind alone. He preached that honor lies not in obedience to authority, but in the fearless pursuit of truth. And in propagating the idea

that truth is above politics, and conscience beyond law, he paved the way for Christianity itself.

We are, all of us, descended from him—from Saint Paul to Martin Luther to Einstein. The questions he raised dominated philosophy for 2,000 years. The \*Socratic\* method of questioning and teaching has never been surpassed. And wherever men today pursue truth, or are ready to die for intellectual freedom, wherever men assert the holy right to think, to argue, to challenge, to debate—in the conviction that life unexamined is indeed not worth living—they are following the example of that ugly saint who never wrote a word. His ideas were immortalized by Plato, who called him “the bravest, wisest, most just man of all we know.” 📖

From “They Made Our World” - LOOK Magazine series (1960)



"Death of Socrates" Jacques-Louis David (1787)

## THE HEMLOCK AND THE CHATTERBOX

Emily Wilson, *The Death Of Socrates: Hero, Villain, Chatterbox, Saint* (Profile Books)

Book Review by  
Carolyne Larrington

*A new book recalls Socrates' strangeness, his notorious ugliness, his supercilious and enraging manner*

Once every schoolchild knew the tale of the death of Socrates. The grieving friends, the sage's matter-of-fact reports of how far his paralysis had progressed, the unstinting discussion of philosophy, and the final reminder of his debt to the gods before he fell silent: though a staple of moral education forty years ago, these are things now less well-known, perhaps less relevant. Emily Wilson's book *The Death of Socrates* is the latest in Profile's series reassessing historical moments, following reappraisals of King Alfred, of the assassination of Julius Caesar, and of Guernica; the summer of 1967 and the 1916 siege at the Dublin GPO will be treated in forthcoming volumes. A professor of Classics at the University of Pennsylvania, Wilson has written a sprightly and illuminating account of the events surrounding Socrates' execution by means of a self-administered drink of hemlock; the probable historical reasons for his trial and judgment; and the ways in which later ages—from Socrates' immediate successors among the Greeks, through the Romans, Christian apologists, Renaissance thinkers, Enlightenment sages and anxious moderns—have understood the death of Socrates. Her style is engagingly straightforward and inclusive. In short punchy sentences, she suggests that her readers will learn “how this event has been recycled, reinterpreted and re-evaluated. . . You too must find your own vision of Socrates”. At times, her tone has the deliberate simplification of a freshman lecture course; yet, while the book wisely takes no prior knowledge for granted, it is scrupulous in drawing attention to differences of academic opinion.

Plato's is the accepted account; what we didn't learn about in school was Xenophon's version of Socrates, a dullish wiseacre who gives banal advice about moderation, diet, exercise and self-control to a receptive populace. Only his wife, Xanthippe, is unappreciative of his common-sense views. Wilson engages too with the Socrates of Aristophanes, a fraudulent, word-chopping boffin, whose satirical depiction in *The Clouds* provides an excellent introduction to Socratic philosophy. Under the headings “Knowledge and Ignorance”, “Socratic Irony”, “Wisdom Is Not For Sale”, “Happiness, Choice and Being Good”, Wilson explains the essentials of Socrates' credo. At the same time, she shows how Plato's account of them dovetails with the charges laid against Socrates by the Athenian state: charges of failing to worship the city's gods, introducing new deities and corrupting the young. Wilson deftly lays bare the political tensions in Athens in the aftermath of the unsuccessful war against Sparta when its democracy was in a precarious state. Anxiety was sparked by Socrates' relationship with

Alcibiades, the playboy who had profaned the Eleusinian Mysteries and thus had probably incurred the wrath of the gods. Wilson shows very clearly how Socrates' strangeness, his notorious ugliness, and his practice of a profession normally associated with foreigners, all combined to make him a troubling figure for the ordinary Athenian.

Socrates did not need to die. He conceded that a fine might be appropriate punishment for the charges against him, but his "supercilious and enraging" manner seems to have provoked the jury to vote for capital punishment. Once judgment was passed, he might have escaped into exile, but he chose to remain and obey the laws of the state, demonstrating once again the foolishness of the citizenry and his own wisdom in thus curtailing the debilities of old age. Wilson's close reading of Plato's account suggests interestingly, if not altogether persuasively, that Socrates' last words, the reminder to Crito that he owes a cock to Asclepius, the god of medicine and of obstetrics, signal the philosopher's final paradox: "dying is like childbirth and death is like being reborn". For some Romans, Socrates talked too much while dying a rather comfortable death. According to Plutarch, Cato the Elder called him "a big chatterbox"; the painless demise was contrasted with the hideous suicide of Cato the Younger. As an explicit act of political protest, inspired by Socrates, Cato stabbed himself till his innards extruded; after his wound had been sewn up, he tore it open again and ripped out his bowels. This scene is illustrated, along with numerous versions of Socrates' end.

Early Christian writers often considered Socrates alongside Jesus; Justin Martyr (first century AD) asserts his conviction that Christianity was the culmination of Socrates' teaching. For Tertullian, on the other hand, Socrates' gentle death marks his Stoicism as inferior to the faith and courage of Christian martyrs.

The last two chapters of Wilson's book are, inevitably, a bit of a gallop. She discusses the revived interest in the death of Socrates in pre-Revolutionary France, and in the writings of Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Brecht and Derrida. Finally we arrive at some terrible-sounding recent novels. In one, Socrates is dragged out of Limbo to approve the principles of the Founding Fathers of America; in another, time-travel allows an idealistic student to try to reverse the events of 399 BC. Fittingly, perhaps, Emily Wilson's book ends with the comic and ironic version of Friedrich Durrenmatt's *Der Tod des Sokrates*. In this piece Socrates dies silently and enigmatically, leaving the last word to Xanthippe. She asserts that Socrates' truth was knowing how to be

himself, rather than, like all other men, merely acting a part. The Death of Socrates is sometime populist—as in the suggestion that Xenophon’s Socrates would now be running motivational seminars on self-empowerment—but always informative and enjoyable. 📖

**Carolyne Larrington** is Tutor in Old and Middle English Literature at St John’s College, Oxford. Her most recent book is *King Arthur’s Enchantresses: Morgan and her sisters in Arthurian tradition*, published last year.

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*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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