

Lecture 2.1: About Socrates

Now that you have an understanding of the origin of the word “philosophy” and how it was first used by the philosopher Pythagoras (Lecture 1.1) and the 4 general areas or divisions of philosophy (Lecture 1.2), there is a 3rd way by which you can have an answer to the question of “what is philosophy?” and that is by becoming familiar with a particular philosopher who dedicated himself (and died) for philosophy. This philosopher is **SOCRATES (470 – 399 BCE)**. Arguably, he exemplified what it is like to be philosopher. It is our hope that by becoming familiar with his life and philosophical claims, you will gain a deeper understanding not only of what philosophy is but also of what philosophers do when they philosophize. So, I encourage you to meet and get to know **SOCRATES**.

1. Socrates (470-399 BCE) – did not write philosophical works, except for a poem that he wrote while he was in jail awaiting his execution. Instead, he philosophized by engaging in a conversation with anyone who claims to have knowledge. Through this conversation, he tries to find out if the person claiming to have knowledge really knows what he/she claims to know. This *philosophizing* style of Socrates (which is essentially a question-and-answer method) has come to be known as the **Socratic method (it is also referred to as Socrates’ *elenchus*)**.
2. Since Socrates himself did not write anything about his philosophy, whatever we know about Socrates has come from other people who wrote about Socrates and his philosophy. One of those who wrote about Socrates is **Plato (427-347BCE)**.
3. In the basic works of Plato (called Dialogues of Plato), we read about Socrates. There are 26 dialogues of Plato. In all of these dialogues (**except for 2**), Plato made Socrates the main speaker or character in the dialogue. So, by reading these dialogues of Plato, we get to know about Socrates and the philosophizing of Socrates. Typically, the 26 dialogues of Plato are divided in 3 groups:
 - the **earlier** dialogues (for example, Apology, Euthyphro, and Crito are considered to be the earlier dialogues of Plato)
 - the middle dialogues (for example, Meno, Phaedo, Republic and Symposium are considered to be middle dialogues of Plato)
 - the **late** dialogues (for example, Parmenides, Timaeus, and Laws are considered to be the late dialogues of Plato, written by Plato when he was in his 70s).
4. The earlier dialogues of Plato are called **Socratic dialogues** not only because Socrates is the main speaker in these dialogues (that is true for all the dialogues of Plato, except for 2

of these dialogues) but **primarily** because the lines spoken by Socrates in these dialogues are meant (even though written by Plato) to reflect the philosophical views of Socrates himself.

5. We can also get to know Socrates from another source – through **Xenophon (c. 430-350BCE)**. He was a contemporary of Plato, about 2 years older than Plato. The profession of Xenophon, if we are to use today's perspective, is that of a news reporter. He reports about the goings-on, and the movers and shakers of the Athenian society. Unquestionably, Socrates is one of those movers and shakers in Athens at that time. So, many of the reports done by Xenophon were about Socrates. He had done interviews of the people who knew Socrates when Socrates was a soldier, people who knew the family of Socrates, people who were friends of Socrates, etc. When **Socrates died in 399 BCE**, Xenophon compiled all these interviews about Socrates, together with the past reports he had done on Socrates, and this compilation was made into a book. This book was titled **Memorabilia** (translated in English as **My Recollections of Socrates**).
6. **From Plato**, we get to know Socrates as a philosopher and the way Socrates philosophized. **From Xenophon**, we get to know Socrates, not so much as a philosopher, but more as an individual or as a person – as a son, as a husband, as a father, as a friend, as a soldier, and we get to know from the Xenophon about the friends of Socrates and where Socrates typically hangs-out with his friends, etc. Both Plato and Xenophon are professed friends of Socrates. They both admire Socrates. So to have a more balanced view of Socrates, we also need to get to know Socrates from someone who disliked Socrates and who disapproved of his so-called philosophizing. We can get that view of Socrates from the Greek writer of comic plays, **Aristophanes**.
7. Aristophanes wrote a comic play entitled **The Clouds**, in which Aristophanes makes fun of the so-called philosophizing of Socrates. In this comedy, Aristophanes tries to show that what Socrates is doing as he philosophizes is harmful to Athens. His comic play is Aristophanes' way of criticizing Socrates.
8. This comic play was performed live on stage (in a theater), night after night after night and many Athenians watched this live performance. From watching this comic play, many Athenians formed their negative opinions of Socrates, even though they have not actually met Socrates or seen Socrates as he (Socrates) philosophized. Many rumors and negative stories about Socrates originated from this comic play.
9. **Socrates did not originally plan to become a philosopher.** When Socrates was a young man (just like many young men in Athens at that time), all that he (S) wanted to do was to follow in the footsteps of his father. By profession, Socrates' father (his name was

Sophroniscus) was a sculptor or a stonemason. His father had a shop where he does his craft. When Socrates was a young man, he would work in his father's shop as a trainee or apprentice in order to learn his father's profession. He just wanted to become a sculptor like his father (**like father like son**).

10. However, something unexpected and dramatic happened to Socrates when he was a young man that convinced him (S) that his mission in life was to be philosopher for Athens. He was convinced that to be a philosopher was a divine mission given to him Apollo, one the beloved gods of the Athenians. Socrates was devoted to Apollo and lived his life in obedience to the commands of Apollo. One of the commands of Apollo to the Athenians is to '**know thy self**'. Socrates was convinced that he was assigned by Apollo to become a philosopher for Athens so that through his questioning he can help his fellow Athenians come to know their real self and to know if what they claim to know they really know. This is also the reason why Socrates' style of philosophizing is through his questioning of those who profess to have knowledge. By questioning them about what they claim to know S (at least this is what S thinks he is doing) thinks he is helping them to come to look into themselves, to know their real self and thus follow the command given by Apollo to the Athenians.