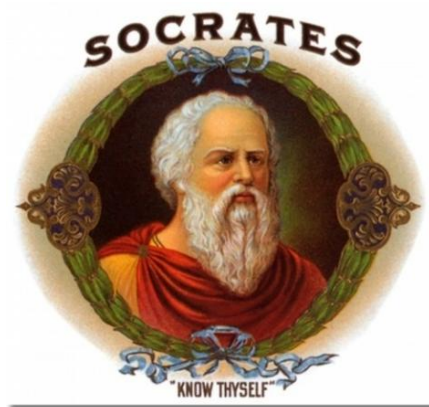




Socrates, a leading Greek philosopher, was the teacher of Plato (who was the teacher of Aristotle). Alexander the Great, who studied under Aristotle, was thus in a unique position to learn what had been deduced by three of Greece's greatest thinkers.

Today, Socrates is still studied through the works of Plato. He is equally known, however, for a trial which condemned him to death when he was nearly seventy years old.

That trial, and execution, took place in Athens in 399 BC. The events still puzzle historians. In a society which enjoyed more democracy (and resulting freedom) than any the world had seen to that time, an elderly man was put to death for what he taught his students. Today we wonder ... How could such a thing be?

Adding to the conundrum is this fact: Socrates had taught students his entire adult life - and no one had stopped him before. Yet ... a jury of 500 Athenians condemned him not long before he would have died a natural death.

So what was it about Socrates that made him so controversial?

Greek philosophers, before Socrates, were mainly interested in the physical world. We would refer to that as the study of metaphysics.

Socrates, however, was interested in something quite different. He questioned everything, and taught his students to question everything.

He, and they - under his guidance - embarked on a mutual quest not to study what *is* - such as we find in the physical world - but to search for what *ought to be*. Socrates believed that searching-for - and finding - truth and justice would help everyone to live a virtuous life.

Virtue, said Socrates, depends on wisdom and - together - virtue and wisdom lead to a happy life.

For Socrates, being virtuous meant that he would help people in their search for knowledge. If he put the well-being of others before the well-being of himself - as he helped his students search for knowledge - he would actually benefit from his endeavors.

Why?

Because, said Socrates, the world becomes a better place when people are wise.

Couldn't people gain wisdom by studying things in the physical world? Why would Socrates reject the focus on the physical world, and the study of what *is*, in favor of searching for *concepts* like virtue, or truth or justice?

Because, for one thing, Socrates believed that interacting with the physical world could be deceptive. His senses, for example, could play tricks on him. And if his senses played tricks on him, that could interfere with his focus on using his mind to gain knowledge.

Recognizing that searching for truth is a time-consuming and very difficult task, Socrates spent little time on accumulating material possessions. Most of the time he didn't even wear shoes.

So single-minded was his focus on helping his students learn that his main occupation in life became dialoguing with his students - like Plato - and engaging them with critical-thinking questions. With little interest in acquiring "things," and little-to-no time to pen his own thoughts, Socrates aspired to live a wise and virtuous life.

If he could accomplish that, he believed he would become a happy man.

At the time Socrates was a teaching philosopher, other philosophers in Greece - called Sophists - completely disagreed with his methods and his style. These paid professional teachers believed they had all the answers, so what was Socrates seeking? Didn't he know that "might makes right?" Didn't he know that the opinions of the Sophists could be totally trusted?

Without being offensive, or patronizing, Socrates took an interesting approach with these know-it-all people (and all their assumptions).

Prefacing his inquiries with phrases like "I am very conscious that I am not wise at all" - as he did in Plato's *Apology* - he would then launch into posing questions, on difficult topics, which the Sophists would find hard to answer.

Without Socrates expressing his own point of view or hinting at an answer, during his cross-examinations, the Sophists would reveal their actual ignorance on various topics.

This was Socrates' way and, today, we call that approach the "Socratic Method." It helps us to test our assumptions about things and, if necessary, to reject assumptions - even long-held assumptions - which, on examination, make no sense.

Eliminating our assumptions, then asking tough questions about difficult topics, makes all of us think really hard. Under such circumstances, we can't glibly spout-out a memorized phrase, or regurgitate someone else's answer because, with the Socratic Method, there's always another question.

The Socratic approach is intended to get to the bottom of things, to:

- Find-out what's really in a person's mind; and
- Determine how well that person understands the subject at hand.

Socrates' approach actually helps us to get wisdom because it exposes what we don't know. And ... believe it or not ... to Socrates, *knowing* that we don't know IS wisdom! Because ... only when we realize that we *don't* know will we earnestly seek to fill-in our knowledge gap.

Credits:

An artist's interpretation of how Socrates looked, during his lifetime, based on the sculptures from ancient times. Image online, courtesy the Frostburg State University website.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Socrates-Teacher-of-Plato>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Socrates-Teacher-of-Plato>