

Read the text in detail. You can refer to Translation when necessary.

The man who asked questions

Nigel Warburton

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. As a young man he had been a brave soldier fighting in the Peloponnesian War 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.

4. 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, said 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.

5. 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 20 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.

6. 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.

7. 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."

8. 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.

9. The word "philosopher" comes from the Greek words meaning "love of wisdom." The Western tradition in philosophy 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.

10. 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.

11. Athens as a whole didn't value Socrates. Many Athenians felt that Socrates was dangerous and was deliberately undermining the government. In 399 BC, when Socrates was 70 years old, he was sentenced to death. He was put to death by being forced to drink poison made from hemlock. 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.

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The greatest sage in China

H. G. Creel

1. Twenty-five hundred years ago there was born in China a child whose life was to influence human history as few have done. Tradition says that he came of noble ancestry and was the descendant of kings. At his birth, it is related, dragons and

"spirit maidens" hovered in the air. But Confucius himself said, "When young, I was without rank and in humble circumstances."

2. Tradition paints him as a strict pedant, laying down precise rules for men to follow in their conduct and their thinking. The truth is that he carefully avoided laying down rules, because he believed that no creed formulated by another person can excuse any man from the duty of thinking for himself.

3. He is often called a reactionary, whose primary aim was to restore the ways of antiquity and to bolster the authority of the hereditary aristocracy. In fact, he advocated and helped to bring about such sweeping social and political reforms that he must be counted among the great revolutionaries. Within a few centuries after his death hereditary aristocracy had virtually ceased to exist in China, and Confucius had contributed more than any other man to its destruction.

4. As a young man he had to earn his living at tasks that bordered on the menial. From this he gained, and never lost, a deep sympathy for the common people. Their problems and sufferings were many. Centralized government had broken down. The feudal lords acknowledged only nominal allegiance to the king. Yet they could not be called independent, for some of them were no more than puppets in the hands of their own swashbuckling underlings. Public and private wars raged unchecked. There was very little law and order save what each man could enforce by his own right arm, his armed followers, or his powers of intrigue. Even the greatest noble could not be sure that he would not be ruined and perhaps assassinated. The position of the common people was tragic. Whoever won the wars, they lost. Even when there was peace they had no security, for they had no power. They were virtual pawns of the aristocrats, whose principal interests had come to be hunting, war, and extravagant living. To pay for these pastimes they taxed the people beyond what the traffic could bear, and suppressed all protest ruthlessly.

5. To the young Confucius these conditions seemed intolerable, and he resolved to devote his life to trying to right them. He talked to others about the way in

which the world might be made a better place to live in. Gradually he gathered about himself a group of young men to study his doctrines, and so he became known as a teacher.

6. The essentials of his teachings were simple. Everywhere about him he saw men struggling against each other, but he refused to believe that that was the natural state of society. He thought it was normal for men to cooperate; to strive, not to get the better of each other, but to promote the common welfare. In his opinion a ruler's success should be measured by his ability, not to amass wealth and power for himself, but to bring about the welfare and happiness of his people.

7. Yet for Confucius it was not enough to be a teacher. He wanted to direct the government of a state and to see the world of which he dreamed come to life under his hand. It is clear, however, that the rulers of the day cannot have seriously considered putting real power into his hands. At best they must have thought him a harmless eccentric, but one who could become dangerous if given power. They did, however, give rather high posts to some of his disciples. It was doubtless at the insistence of these students that Confucius was finally given an office, in his native state of Lu, which carried a respectable title but probably involved no real authority.

8. When he saw that he could accomplish nothing he resigned his post, and set off on travels which took him to a number of states, in search of a ruler who would use his Way. He never found one. These journeys lasted a decade or more. They accomplished little, but they did prove that he was willing to undergo great hardship and abuse for his principles.

9. Returning to Lu he resumed his teaching. Five years later he died. His life had had about it very little of the dramatic. There was no climax and no martyrdom. None of his chief ambitions had been fulfilled. There is little doubt that when he died everyone considered him a failure. Certainly he himself did.

10. After his death, as his teachings were handed down from one generation of

disciples to another, the Confucian group gradually grew in size and influence. The doctrine was changed and elaborated until Confucius himself would scarcely have recognized it, yet two principles remained: the insistence that those who govern should be chosen not for their birth but for their virtue and ability, and that the true end of government is the welfare and happiness of the people. This latter principle made Confucianism popular with the common people, as war and oppression increased and life became more and more difficult.

11 In the 17th and 18th centuries, a number of the Jesuit missionaries entered China and became scholars and even officials at the Chinese court. In letter after letter to Europe they told of Confucius. Thus Confucius became known to Europe just at the beginning of the philosophic movement known as the Enlightenment. A large number of philosophers, including Leibniz, Wolff, and Voltaire, as well as statesmen and men of letters, used his name and his ideas to further their arguments, and they themselves were influenced in the process. Both in France and in England the fact that China, under the impulsion of Confucianism, had long since virtually abolished hereditary aristocracy, was used as a weapon in the attack on hereditary privilege. The philosophy of Confucius played a role of some importance in the development of democratic ideals in Europe and in the background of the French Revolution. Through French thought it indirectly influenced the development of democracy in America.