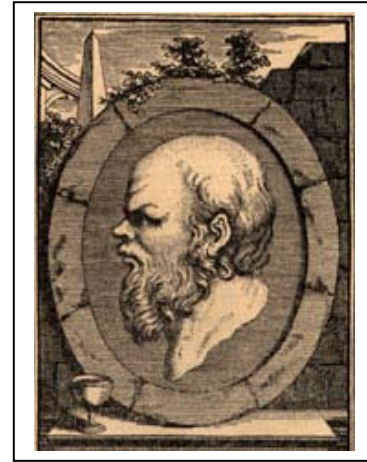


Socrates (469 - 399 B.C.)

Socrates was an ancient Greek philosopher, who profoundly affected Western philosophy through his influence on Plato. Born in Athens. He initiated a question-and-answer method of teaching as a means of achieving self-knowledge. The sacred Oracle in the city of Delphi declared that he was the 'wisest man in the world', but Socrates never wrote a book.

Socrates studied the Sophists, Ionian philosophers, and the culture of Athens in the time of Pericles. Socrates believed in the superiority of argument over writing.



Socrates believed he could serve his country best by devoting himself to teaching and persuading Athenians to engage in self-examination. His logic emphasized rational argument and the quest for general definitions. He believed in a purely objective understanding of justice, love, and virtue.

His life and ideas were recorded by his pupil, the great philosopher Plato, and by the historian Xenophon. He was a soldier in the Peloponnesian War, and afterwards returned to Athens. His theories of virtue and justice have survived through the writings of Plato. Socrates liked to spend his time in the streets and market places of the city, talking with whoever would listen to him. He claimed to receive a kind of divine guidance in his wisdom.

Although a patriot and a man of deep religious conviction, Socrates was disliked by many of his contemporaries, who disagreed with his attitude toward the Athenian state and the established religion. Eventually he got trouble with the Athenians government, who thought his claim was blasphemous. In 399 BC he was brought to try, charged with blaspheming, as well as corrupting the minds of Athenians youth, leading them away from the principles of democracy. He defended himself skillfully, and was only found guilty by a tiny majority of those who tried his case. He was sentenced to death. His friends planned his escape from prison, but he insisted on complying with the law and dying for his cause. He calmly fulfilled his sentence by drinking a cup of hemlock (poison), a customary procedure of execution.