

Socrates and the Courage to Question

By Joseph Sackitey

In *Plato's Apology*, I see how Socrates' unique way of life—marked by relentless questioning and moral introspection—both enriched Athenian society and ultimately led to his death. I deeply admire Socrates and his commitment to uncovering truth, even when it meant challenging societal norms. Yet, I also believe his decision to openly question powerful figures and religious authority, especially the pronouncement of the Oracle at Delphi, crossed a line that any society would find difficult to accept.

Socrates was charged with corrupting the youth and not believing in the gods of Athens. While I don't think he deliberately sought to mislead young people, I do believe there's merit to the first charge of impiety. His skepticism of the Oracle's claim—that no one was wiser than he—was not just a personal mission but a public act that could be interpreted as defying divine authority. As Socrates recounts:

“Chaerephon... went to Delphi and dared to ask the oracle this—he asked if there was anyone wiser than I. The Pythia replied that no one was wiser.”

Socrates' response was to investigate and test the Oracle's words by questioning others. But in doing so, he implied that the god might be mistaken—a notion that would understandably disturb the religious foundation of Athenian society.

Yet Socrates' legacy is not one of arrogance but of self-awareness. His famous declaration—“*The unexamined life is not worth living*”—still resonates today. He didn't claim to know everything; rather, he claimed to know that he knew nothing. That humility became the cornerstone of his philosophy. By teaching others to ask difficult questions and consider multiple perspectives, he cultivated habits of critical thinking and self-reflection—skills vital to any healthy society.

As a Christian who values both faith and intellectual growth, I can relate to the challenges of defending one's beliefs under scrutiny. Before studying Socrates, I might have felt ashamed or defensive when asked questions I couldn't answer. Now, I see that admitting ignorance isn't a weakness—it's a courageous act. Like

Socrates, I've come to believe that recognizing the limits of our knowledge is the beginning of wisdom.

Socrates never sought to destroy values. His goal was to test them—to make sure they were truly understood, not blindly accepted. If he were to question my religious beliefs today, I believe it would not shake my faith, but deepen it. His probing would challenge me to search for meaning in the things I claim to believe. As he said in his defense:

“I am the sort of person who is given to you by the god, and I think the city will not easily find another such man.”

He viewed his role not as a threat to Athens, but as a necessary voice—someone who stirred the city from complacency and encouraged thoughtful examination of life and virtue.

The idea that self-examination leads to personal growth continues to inspire me. A life unexamined is lived passively. But when we stop to reflect on our actions, beliefs, and values, we gain deeper understanding and clarity—not just about the world, but about ourselves. That process builds confidence, moral strength, and intellectual humility.

Socrates made enemies, but he also inspired generations of thinkers—particularly young people who were drawn to his honesty and boldness. He famously likened himself to a gadfly, sent to awaken Athens from its moral sleep. In response to accusations of corrupting the youth, he asked:

“Then all the Athenians, as it appears, make them noble and good except me, and I alone corrupt them. Is this what you are saying?”

Even in the face of death, Socrates stood by his principles. He refused to compromise his beliefs for safety or comfort. His defense was unapologetically bold. While denying the charge of atheism, he stated:

“I do believe that there are gods, and I am not altogether an atheist.”

This suggests that his trial was never simply about religious belief—it was about the discomfort his questions created for those in power.

Socrates died for his philosophy—but he also lived it fully. His commitment to intellectual honesty, critical inquiry, and self-examination continues to influence how we think about truth, freedom, and the good life. For me, his legacy is a call to courage—not just to question the world around me, but to question myself—and to do so with integrity.