



## Socrates

Western Philosophy (University of South Africa)



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## SOCRATES

- 'Socrates' is a character in Plato's dialogues, portrayed as the paradigm of the philosopher, disinterestedly pursuing truth, keen to promote clear thought, deep understanding and knowledge of virtue.
- He is portrayed as loved and admired by his friends and the young, as kindly and witty, and as ferociously clever.
- Socrates was **born in Athens around 470 BCE, and died there, in prison, in 399 BCE**, having been condemned to death for 'impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. He was in his 70's when he passed on.
- The chief sources of our knowledge of Socrates are Plato's writings and to a lesser extent those of another of his pupils, Xenophon, though their accounts of him differ somewhat.

### Socrate's writing

- There are no reports of Socrates having written anything, though he is said to have co-authored or anyway contributed to some of the plays of his friend Euripides.
- the most accurate portrait of Socrates occurs in the Apology, which is the speech given by Socrates in his own defence at his trial.

### Socrate's influence on Plato

- it was Socrates whom Plato took as his point of departure for a philosophical achievement of enormous range and influence.

### Socrate's philosophy

- The first thing to note about Socrates as a philosopher is his method, the 'Socratic method', known as elenchus or 'refutation'. It proceeds thus: Socrates asks his interlocutor for a definition of an important ethical concept such as justice, continence or courage. He wants to be told what is the essence of (say) courage, that single fundamental thing that defines all courageous actions and people. He does not want examples, or lists of characteristics that some courageous acts or people might exemplify and that timid or cowardly acts or people do not exemplify. Then, when a definition is offered, Socrates demonstrates that other things held by the interlocutor to be true are inconsistent with that definition.

### The unity of virtue

- Socrates also believed in the unity of the virtues – that if a person has one of the virtues he has them all. But this too contradicts experience. An unjust person might be courageous, a just person timid.