

Socrates: A Provocative Agitator and A Defiant Sage

Miss Bompu Gamlin

Final Year Masters Student of Political Science

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Abstract

In Plato's Apology, it is evident that Socrates is an aggressive and defiant philosopher whose unique method of questioning revealed the ignorance of many and pushed the Athenian populace to deconstruct their belief systems and critically examine their societal norms. His provocative behavior made him a highly polarizing personality and also a celebrated philosopher. His criticism of democracy, material pursuits, and traditional Athenian values earned him much respect and followers among the young rebellious community; however, it also made him a hostile enemy of the elite and the general public. This paper will delve into the tensions that arose from the impact of Socrates' philosophical ideals on Athenian social norms and political values. This paper will also analyze how the Socratic method influenced the youth and how his defiant behavior highlighted the clash between intellectual freedom and societal order.

Keywords: socratic method, athenian democracy, philosophical dissent, intellectual freedom, trial of socrates, political philosophy.

Introduction

We know of Socrates mainly from Plato's writings, who was his student. Socrates is considered one of the towering philosophers of all time, playing an integral role in shaping ethical and Western political thought. Through Plato's writings, it is revealed that Socrates' method of questioning to uncover ignorance made him highly controversial and unpopular. The timing of practicing the Socratic method couldn't have been worse because, in 399 BCE, Athens was just recovering from its defeat in the Peloponnesian War and the brutalizing regime of the Thirty Tyrants. A city that still didn't have firm footing, with political hostilities rampant, found Socrates' method too provocative and destabilizing. His influence on many young men, who later betrayed or undermined the city, placed him in a questionable state. Was Socrates a mere philosopher, or was he an anti-national who threatened Athenian democracy and values?

The Socratic Method: Why Ask So Many Questions?

Socrates claimed that he taught nothing. His method was not teaching but rather encouraging people to question themselves and critically examine their beliefs. His method aimed to guide a person toward finding true wisdom and ultimate truth through deep self-reflection. He asked probing questions designed to challenge beliefs and assumptions. He never gave direct answers but prodded the querent into constant questioning and self-examination to gain deeper knowledge.

Socrates was declared the wisest by the Oracle of Delphi, after which he investigated its veracity by questioning men reputed to be the wisest in Athens. By asking them thought-provoking questions, he encouraged them to critically examine their beliefs. He finally concluded that all of them lacked true knowledge, as they believed themselves to be wise and according to him, only a person who can discern their own ignorance is a wise man (Plato, *Apology*, 21b–23b). For instance, Socrates used his method on Euthyphro, an expert on piety. He asked Euthyphro to define piety, and every answer Euthyphro gave was deconstructed and dismantled by Socrates through a series of questions. The result was that Euthyphro could not give a definitive answer, exposing his inadequacy in providing a universally accepted definition of piety (Plato, *Euthyphro*, 10a–15e).

Socrates' intention was not to deride anyone but rather to help them realize the limits of their knowledge. And yet, he offended and humiliated many politicians, poets, and craftsmen who were reputed to be knowledgeable. While a few admired his ability to expose ignorance, many resented him for making them feel foolish. Not only that, but his method was also questioned for its purpose. Critics argue that although Socrates was a genius in dismantling people's beliefs, he offered no constructive alternatives, leaving many struggling with uncertainty and disorientation. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper observed that challenging deeply rooted beliefs can be disturbing for individuals who value tradition and stability. This discomfort, he noted, is at odds with the Socratic method, which emphasizes questioning and critical thinking (Popper, 1945). The Socratic method, with its continuous probing and thought-provoking open-ended questions, can be exhausting for an average person. Some may prefer to remain content with their level of knowledge rather than subjecting themselves to microscopic dissection of their beliefs and assumptions. For them, truth is bitter, and ignorance is bliss.

Friedrich Nietzsche criticized Socrates as someone whose constant questioning contradicted traditional values, disrupted the natural instincts that held society together, and left society uncertain and morally adrift (Nietzsche, 1990). The implications of Socrates' teaching extended beyond individual interactions, challenging the Athenian systems of religion, traditions, and institutions. His teachings sowed seeds of doubt among the population, which some interpreted as social defiance and destabilization of societal norms and values. The application of his method in markets, courts, and symposia created an environment of doubt, where even public consensus was questioned. Thus, Socratic philosophy seemed to propagate civil disarray, sabotaging Athens' civic unity and shared values.

How Socrates Shaped and Scared the Youth

One of the main charges brought against Socrates was corrupting the minds of the Athenian youth. Many young and ambitious men from prominent families were drawn to Socrates' sharp and rebellious intellect and ideas. Alcibiades was Socrates' most well-known student. He was

brilliant but a reckless general and politician. He was deeply influenced by Socrates' ideals. During the Peloponnesian War, Alcibiades defected to Sparta and later to Persia, which led many to accuse him of betraying Athens. Critics believe that Alcibiades' behavior was due to the heavy influence of Socratic-style teaching, as it left him morally disconnected and unhinged, resulting in self-serving actions (Kagan, 2003).

For those who supported Socrates, it would seem that he was not encouraging the youth to rebel but rather to think more deeply and for themselves. However, Socrates' emphasis on questioning authority was perceived as disrespecting elders and traditional social norms.

Socrates did not give direct or clear answers or solutions after questioning or contradicting traditional beliefs. This left his students in a state of suspended judgment, causing confusion and uncertainty among them (Guthrie, 1971). His rigid focus on exposing contradictions in the absence of moral or practical guidance may have facilitated some philosophical disorientation or even cynicism, as his students were steered toward doubting societal norms without any means to replace them with stable convictions. As a result, Socrates was charged as a corrupter of the youth, a sentiment that resonated with the collective mindset of the populace.

Socrates vs. Democracy

Socrates was also charged with questioning Athenian democracy, thus challenging the very foundations of the place in which he lived. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates compares a democratic city to a ship where the crew, inexperienced in navigation, competes to take control, ignoring the skilled captain. Just as a ship requires a trained navigator, a city requires knowledgeable leaders to avoid disaster (Plato, *Republic*, 488a–489d). This view made him unpopular because, by criticizing democratic ideals that enabled equal participation of all citizens in the governing process irrespective of their knowledge or expertise, he essentially implied that common folks were not intellectually equipped to make political decisions. He argued that politics and governance should be the responsibility of a virtuous and knowledgeable elite rather than the popular majority, thereby suggesting an elitist form of government (Guthrie, 1971). Many Athenians viewed this stance as dismissive of their rights and intelligence. These ideas clashed with the core Athenian values of equality and citizen participation.

Moreover, Socrates had close ties with Critias, a leader of the Thirty Tyrants—a pro-Spartan oligarchy that ruled Athens after its defeat by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War (404–403 BCE). These thirty men governed Athens brutally and oppressively for almost a year, after which they were overthrown, and democracy was restored. Socrates' association with the Thirty Tyrants fueled suspicions that he harbored anti-democratic sentiments and supported oligarchic principles (Kagan, 2003). Socrates' cynicism toward democracy also extended to the Athenian jury system, which he condemned as being swayed by rhetoric rather than reason. His condemnation of rhetoric essentially extended to the Sophists—Athenian teachers who were paid

to teach citizens situational ethics, providing them tools to excel in law and politics.

According to the Sophists, there were no absolute principles; rather, moral truths were relative to circumstances. Socrates' rejection of relativism and his emphasis on absolute moral truths rebuked the Athenian values of pragmatism and versatility, presenting a rigid norm that many saw as idealistic (Vlastos, 1991).

During his trial, Socrates criticized the persuasive manner of speaking employed by his accuser, Meletus (Plato, Apology). He argued that Meletus used persuasive but misleading rhetoric, where style took precedence over substance, manipulating the jury through dishonest arguments. Socrates, by contrast, claimed that he spoke plainly, focusing solely on discovering the truth. He urged the jury to judge his speech based on its justice and validity rather than its style and eloquence. However, his critique of the Sophists as manipulators of truth appeared hypocritical, as Socrates himself was a skilled rhetorician, though he used his skills to deconstruct and critique rather than persuade. By taking such an anti-sophistry stance, Socrates overlooked the fact that persuasive speech is an essential aspect of civic discourse in a democracy. His inflexible and rigid approach further alienated him from the people who were to decide his fate during the trial.

The Trial: A Defiant Philosopher to the End

The trial of Socrates (399 BCE) is considered an important event in ancient philosophy, as it highlighted tensions between free speech and democratic authority. This event became a precursor to debates about justice and dissent in society (Brickhouse & Smith, 1989). As is known, he was charged with impiety and corrupting the youth. Eventually, he was sentenced to death by hemlock. Socrates' approach during his legal trial was a performance to behold, as he used his defense not to plead for mercy but to reaffirm his commitment to philosophy. This further proved that he was unyielding and provocative. In his defense, Socrates compared himself to a gadfly—an insect such as a horsefly that bites and irritates livestock—sent by the gods to sting Athens out of its complacency and ignorance (Plato, Apology, 30e–31a). This metaphor captured the essence of Socrates as a provocateur but also reinforced the perception that he was a disruptive force (Brickhouse & Smith, 1989).

When given an opportunity to propose an alternative punishment to the death sentence, Socrates sarcastically suggested that he deserved free meals for life, an honor reserved for Olympic champions (Plato, Apology, 36d–37a). He argued that his philosophical work was a greater service to Athens than athletic victories, claiming that his teachings encouraged deeper self-reflection, virtue, and wisdom. The glory brought by the Olympians through their physical prowess was, in his view, inferior to the service he brought to Athens through philosophy.

However, this suggestion, likely intended to provoke thought and challenge the jury's values, was seen by the wider audience as both arrogant and defiant. His behavior was perceived as non-adherence to and disrespect for Athenian laws and traditional norms. Socrates appeared indifferent to the seriousness of the charges against him, further alienating the jury.

Even after being sentenced to death, Socrates refused offers to escape. In *Crito*, he argued that fleeing would undermine his principles and violate the rule of law. He believed it was better to die unjustly than to compromise his integrity (Plato, *Crito*, 50a–54d). His unshakable commitment to his ideals, although seemingly principled, suggested a disregard for life itself. He prioritized his ideals over his survival, breaking the hearts of his followers, who felt that he was detached from the values of those around him. He asserted that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” reflecting a philosophical elitism that implied only those engaged in constant self-examination led worthy and meaningful lives (Vlastos, 1991). His stance undervalued practical pursuits, and his idealization of an afterlife filled with philosophical dialogue revealed a childlike fantasy that many Athenians saw as out of touch with reality.

Conclusion

Socrates remains one of the most polarizing figures in Western philosophical history. Through his incessant questioning and unyielding commitment to truth, he challenged the core foundations of Athenian societal norms, critiqued democracy, and influenced the youth. He sought to expose ignorance and prod people into deeper self-reflection. His defiant attitude created discord between his ideals and the social values of the city-state, as reflected in his trial, where a majority of the jury sentenced him to death. This verdict revealed Athens’ discomfort in confronting radical ideas that threatened established norms. Socrates’ life serves as a cautionary tale that highlights the potential consequences of intellectual pursuits detached from the broader practicalities and values of the community. His death reminds us of the risks inherent in practicing dogged philosophical idealism. Undoubtedly, Socrates is a martyr of philosophy and has left an indelible mark on Western thought, but his ultimate fate serves as a reminder to future generations that even the most enlightened endeavors must sometimes submit to the collective needs of society.

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