

SOCRATES

Team: Classical Greek United

Position: Short mid-wicket

Status: Totally dead



THINKER
IN
BOXES

Socrates (469–399 BC) was basically the controversial talk radio host of his day. Of course, there was no radio in ancient Greece, but he talked a lot; pissed a lot of people off; and, as far as we know, he didn't write anything down.

Most of what we know about Socrates comes to us from the writings of his contemporaries, including his student Plato. Plato's writings are a bit difficult, and we have to be careful to separate the fictional Socrates that Plato uses as the main character in his dialogues from the historical Socrates. Plato's fictional Socrates is a mechanism for expressing Plato's philosophical ideas rather than a representation of the real Socrates. Also, Plato's fictional Socrates wins every argument, and we know that Socrates lost at least one very important argument—the argument at his trial over his own execution.

Socrates was a well-known critic of the faith that most Athenians placed in popular opinion, particularly as it related to the simple democratic government practiced in Athens. However, most scholars would argue that critical reasoning represents Socrates' true legacy to the study of politics. Some would even argue that it is the philosophical foundation of the Western culture that eventually evolved from Athenian Greek culture.

Socrates' method of critical reasoning centered on the dialectic. The term *dialectic* has taken on a number of meanings and nuances in the last few millennia, but for Socrates it was quite literally a dialogue or discussion in question-and-answer format. As a method of teaching, this is still quite common, and when an instructor forces a conversation in class by asking pointed questions and demanding a response, he or she is in fact using what is commonly referred to as the Socratic Method. Plato's Dialogues are modeled after Socrates' dialectic teaching methods, and Plato used the dialectic as a systematic method of conceptual inquiry. Plato's student Aristotle was a critic of this method, though Aristotle did use the dialectic argumentative structure in his writings, and many would argue that the Socratic dialectic is the foundation that underlies the Aristotelian methods of logic and inquiry. This connection has tremendous implications since it is the Aristotelian method that serves as what many would consider to be the cornerstone of the modern Western model of scientific inquiry.