

It is our duty to do one of two things: either to ascertain the facts, whether by seeking instruction or by personal discovery; or, if this is impossible, to select the best and most dependable theory which human intelligence can supply, and use it as a raft to ride the seas of life—that is, assuming we cannot make the journey with greater confidence and security by the surer means of divine revelation. - Plato, *Phaedo*



Philosophy is a Greek word meaning "love of wisdom." Many of our modern ideas come from ancient Greek philosophy. Socrates was one of the first, and best known, teachers of philosophy. He lived in Athens from 468 BCE to 399 BCE. His method of teaching, the "Socratic Method," was to pose questions to his students to help them discover the truth about life: "What is goodness? What is knowledge? Do we have a soul that lives after death?"

Socrates believed that "the unexamined life is not worth living," and he was often critical of important people in Greek society. The leading citizens of Athens felt that Socrates encouraged the young to question widely accepted beliefs and values, and to reject the gods. As a result, he was accused of corrupting the young.

Socrates did not write down his teachings, but his friend and student Plato recorded much of his thought in the form of "dialogues" or conversations. In the piece that follows, from the "Apology," Plato records Socrates' words as he defends himself in front of the 501 citizens who will be judging whether or not he is guilty.



Socrates' Apology

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In the Apology, Plato writes that the main allegations against Socrates are as follows:

Socrates is an evil-doer, and a curious person, who searches into things under the earth and in heaven, and he makes the worse appear the better cause; and he teaches the aforesaid doctrines to others...

What do they say? Something of this sort: - That Socrates is a doer of evil, and corrupter of the youth, and he does not believe in the gods of the state, and has other new divinities [gods] of his own.

Excerpts from *Apology by Plato, Socrates' Defence*, translated Benjamin Jowett <www.saliu.com/socrates.html>

This is a part of Socrates' speech, after which he was condemned to death by the citizens of Athens. Notice that Socrates refers to his friend Chaerophon's visit to the Oracle at Delphi to find out about wisdom. The Oracle (soothsayer) was believed to have visions inspired by the gods. In ancient Greek times, there was a sign above the entrance to the shrine at Delphi that read: "O Man, know thyself and thou shalt know the world; O Man know the world and thou shalt know thyself."

For the word which I will speak is not mine. I will refer you to a witness who is worthy of credit, and will tell you about my wisdom—whether I have any, and of what sort—and that witness shall be the god of Delphi. You must have known Chaerephon; he was early a friend of mine, and also a friend of yours, for he shared in the exile of the people, and returned with you. Well, Chaerephon, as you know, was very impetuous in all his doings, and he went to Delphi and boldly asked the oracle to tell him whether—as I was saying, I must beg you not to interrupt—he asked the oracle to tell him whether there was anyone wiser than I was, and the Pythian prophetess answered that there was no man wiser. Chaerephon is dead himself, but his brother, who is in court, will confirm the truth of this story.

Why do I mention this? Because I am going to explain to you why I have such an evil name. When I heard the answer, I said to myself, What can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of this riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god and cannot lie; that would be against his nature. After a long consideration, I at
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last thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, "Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest." Accordingly I went to one who had the reputation of wisdom, and observed to him—his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination—and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and wiser still by himself; and I went and tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is - for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him. Then I went to another, who had still higher philosophical pretensions, and my conclusion was exactly the same. I made another enemy of him, and of many others besides him...

