

In the case of Socrates present a profile of the man and his main ideas. Why do you think his ideas were important in the development of philosophy?

Socrates was estimated to be born in 470 BCE and was executed in around 399 BCE. At this time Athens was at the height of its civilisation, enjoying great financial wealth, political influence and artistic culture. Socrates was critical of the government as he feared they would become morally corrupt which would then lead to the destruction of Athens and with it democracy. Socrates formed theories by careful reasoning and primarily focused on understanding a person's moral character (ethics). As a young man –he was a distinguished soldier who had immense physical power. He was extremely disciplined and led a highly virtuous life. In his later years he was often described as an unattractive man who had little regard for his appearance. Socrates was married and had a total of three children. It is important to note that everything we know about Socrates comes from Plato's book 'The Republic'.

Socrates hoped to establish a universal definition of justice that would apply to everyone, everywhere at any time and any place. This was deemed impossible by the Sophists as it contradicted their Theory of Relativity which stated that nothing can be claimed as right or wrong, these beliefs come about as a result of habit and circumstance. Socrates felt that this concept would lead to the destruction of the people of Athens. He argued that it was up to society as a whole to establish things which are right and wrong. Once this was accomplished it could be incorporated into people's lives. Even though Socrates spent his whole life trying to establish a universal definition of justice, he never did.

This was not the only issue he had with the Sophists. Their beliefs clashed again when Socrates claimed that they were not true philosophers as they charged money for their work. Socrates would often debate key ideas in the crowded marketplaces in Athens. He engaged in a series of dialogues with people who were 'experts' on the topic being discussed. He would humiliate these experts using a technique now referred to as "Socratic Irony". By adopting the role of an ignorant questioner he was able to expose the weaknesses in other's arguments. By asking tactful questions the person would eventually come to a dead end and run out of logical responses. Socrates himself did not answer the questions he posed on others. He claimed he was in fact the wiser individual as he was aware of his own ignorance on these issues.

Socrates claimed that virtue i.e. showing high moral standards, was the most valuable of all possessions as it was the only means of being truly happy and is key to saving the soul. He claimed that "knowing what is good is the same as doing what is good." He believed that people who do wrong, do not do so willingly and identified ignorance as being the cause of wrongful behaviour. He believed it was the job of the philosopher "to deliver" insight so that ignorant people can reach a place of true understanding which can only come from within. This role was similar to that of the midwife as the midwife does not give birth to the child but instead helps the mother deliver the baby.

Socrates claimed that is the only means of being truly happy and is key to saving the soul Socrates also claimed that pleasure and happiness can be achieved by living a moral life. An action can be considered right when it promotes humanity's true happiness. He argued that alcohol is against humanity's highest ability, which is reason. He stated that being drunk provided short term pleasure and whatever you are trying to escape will return. He questioned why an individual would willingly harm their body by consuming alcohol as it did not produce long term pleasure and the negative effects such as addiction far outweigh the temporary happiness that it provides.

Socrates preached his belief without accepting any payment. He wanted to save Athens from becoming morally corrupt but his outspoken views on the government landed him into trouble. He was put on trial and was accused of introducing new gods and corrupting the minds of the youth. He was found guilty by a jury of 500. He was then given the choice to go into exile or accept the death penalty, he chose the latter as he valued his clear conscience and truth far too much. He assured the jury that he only acted in the best interests of Athens. Socrates drank hemlock in the company of his friends.

I believe that Socrates ideas were important in the development of philosophy as they forced people to question themselves and second guess what they believed. By engaging in dialogue with 'experts' he showed everyone how little knowledge they truly possessed. In return he hoped people would aim to become more knowledgeable. As a result society would be less morally corrupt as they wouldn't be ignorant and therefore wouldn't act wrongly. Socrates was unique as instead of trying to appear like he accepted that he did not have the answers to all of life's questions. I think that by criticising the government he influenced other people to question traditional beliefs held by a society and to question the legitimacy of authorities. Socrates also taught other great minds like Plato and Aristotle and affected their philosophical teachings.