A 4th-century bc Greek philosopher, Socrates was so influential that those philosophers who came before him are referred to as the presocratics. Even today, the style of seeking the truth through asking questions, often used in the teaching of law, is called the Socratic method. A stonemason by trade, Socrates expressed his true calling by roaming the streets of his native Athens, engaging the city's elite in discussions of philosophical matters and urging a respect for reason, rather than the opinions of the many, as the guide to what is true.

Though Socrates advanced few teachings of his own, his pointed questions often undermined the confidence, self-assurance, and even social status of those who vigorously defended either their own ideas or those that reflected the popular wisdom. His challenges to received orthodoxy brought Socrates many disciples, particularly among the young, but earned him enemies as well. Eventually several leading citizens charged the philosopher, by then an old man in his 70s, with the crimes of corrupting the youth of Athens and failing to worship the city's gods. At his trial, recounted in the Apology of both Plato and Xenophon, Socrates argued that if he were wise, it was not because he knew things that others did not. Instead, any wisdom he might have could only be due to the fact that, unlike many others, Socrates was capable of admitting his own ignorance. His lifelong quest, he claimed, was therefore only an attempt to enlighten himself by finding those who are truly wise. Socrates' spirited defense of his philosophical lifestyle was to no avail: sentenced to death by the drinking of hemlock, he died in 399 bc.

Socrates' greatest philosophical contribution may have been his influence on his protégé Plato, who ranks among the most significant thinkers in the entire Western intellectual tradition. The younger philosopher's writings took the form of dialogues, and Socrates figured as the lead character in the majority of them. Plato's portrait of Socrates highlighted his mentor's wisdom and the insight of his ideas, but blended that presentation with a hagiographic vision of Socrates' philosophical lifestyle as embodying the highest form of living. Though Socrates received less flattering treatment at the hands of others—for example, the playwright Aristophanes—the Platonic image of the man as a secular saint who gave up his life rather than sacrifice his principles is the one that predominantly defines Socrates' image today.

See also
Plato

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