

## On the Significance of Socrates' Death

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**Abstract.** In 399 B.C., Athenians sentenced the death penalty to Socrates for “impiety” and “corrupting the youth”, but his death is always significant during the development of the Western Civilization. Socrates’ transcendental challenging to the Athenian polis made the jury trial and execute him, but his immortal soul has been promoting the development of the Western Civilization.

### Introduction

Socrates (about 470—399 B.C.), the son of Sophroniscus, a sculptor, and Phaenarete, a midwife, was born in Athens on the dawning of the “Golden Age of Greece”[1]. As the great ancient Greek philosopher and the advisor of Plato, he believed in the superiority of argument over writing and therefore spent the greater part of his mature life in the marketplace and public places of Athens, engaging in dialogue and argument with anyone who would listen or who would submit to interrogation. Although a patriot and a man of deep religious conviction, Socrates was nonetheless regarded with suspicion by many of his contemporaries, who disliked his attitude toward the Athenian state and the established religion. In 399 B.C., a 501-Athenian jury sentenced Socrates to death for “impiety and moral corruption of the youth of Athens”[2]. Accepting this outcome with remarkable grace, Socrates drank a cup of hemlock and died in the company of his friends and disciples. Through the following centuries, people all over the world have been casting numerous and various discussions, or even debates, on Socrates’ life, trial and death, but it is his controversial death that has been always significant during the development of the Western civilization. The three great Socratic philosophers, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, were to be “rediscovered” during the Renaissance and their rational, practical, and scientific ideas were to influence the thinking and the governmental, religious, and educational institutions of the entire Western world.

### The Significance of Socrates' Death

Socrates was the most colorful figure in the history of ancient European philosophy. Both Socrates’ and Jesus’ deaths were meaningful events in the western history of thought. Socrates has become one of history’s earliest martyrs of personal conscience and free speech. His noble death was the most beautiful and sorrowful swansong that had been thousand years haunting the way of Plato, of Aristotle, of Justine, of Galileo, of Bruno Giordano, of Hegel, of Nietzsche, of so many successive people dreaming of truth and light, and of Socrates himself. After Socrates’ death, his influence became a dominating one through the greater part of the history of Greek and Roman philosophy down to the end of antiquity, and it has been significant ever since.

#### The Philosophical Meaning.

The Western world often refers to Socrates as the philosopher and the word “philosopher” is so inadequate to capture the greatness of Socrates. He is the ancient Greek thinker who laid the early foundations for Western philosophical thought. The death of Socrates opened a glorious leaf of Western philosophy, of which he is both a saint and a martyr.

Socrates’ trial and execution was not a defeat of philosophy at all. In fact, while the city-state killed the philosopher, it may strengthen philosophy. Socrates’ death brought about the birth of self-knowledge, which made those philosophers after Socrates realize the necessity of self-justification and self-defense. The trial and execution of Socrates — the extraordinary tragedy

that completely changed Plato's life and forever altered the course of Western thought. It is no exaggeration that Plato had been rethinking about Socrates' trial and death. Later, in Republic, Plato dealt with an ideal state ruled by a philosopher but barring poets. So, the death of Socrates did result in the political turn of philosophy, the birth of classical political philosophy.

Death is a big issue of human life. People's viewpoint of death or soul can affect their thinking about life value. It's acknowledged that death is a sorrowful thing which everyone from emperors to common people hates the inevitable destination and would never choose it by his own feeling. However, Socrates' unique life-death view made him show his peaceful grace and calmness towards death. For Socrates, death is not a natural phenomenon but a conscious action and culture. Facing his approaching life end, Socrates made his words run like this: "Let us reflect and we shall see that there is great reason to hope that death is a good[3]". Socrates gave his reason to two things: "Either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is change and migration of the soul from this world to another[4]." Socrates didn't live away from his society, which means he has to face all of his enemies. There was such a misery life that he wanted to escape from this world and turn his hope on the death—a place meaning nothingness, meaning a long sleep without nightmares, without disturbs, and without a wake. As he said: "To die is a gain; for eternity is then only a single night[5]." Another reason for him to hope is to consider death is only a long journey towards a new world, a heaven or a paradise—there is no prejudice, no injustice, and people there don't put a man to death just for asking questions. This existing world disappointed Socrates so much that he had to dream of an ideal land where he could live with the ancient heroes and express his mind freely. These last philosophical words of Socrates determined the solid relation between philosophy and death. Later philosopher had accepted Socrates' last words and been pondering the trial and death of Socrates, which made death begin to comprise an abstract subject of philosophy.

### **The Political Meaning.**

Trial and execution of Socrates in Athens in 399 B.C. puzzles many latter historians. Why, in a society enjoying more wisdom, freedom, and democracy than any other the world had ever seen, would an about seventy-year-old philosopher be put to death just for what he was teaching?

The Athens' democracy is like a gorgeous diamond in the course of human history. As the pre-modality of modern democracy, it had its time, however it just flashed for its localization. Firstly, this direct or participatory democracy is not based on complete laws but it's citizens' virtue. In Greek, the word "democracy" means "exercise of power by the whole people[6]". This kind of plebiscite is liable to form a more terrible majority-ruled mobocracy or social tyranny. Secondly, the Athenian democracy doesn't protect its citizens' basic civil rights. In Athens, the people in their assembly had full and direct control over all policies of the state, and through the jury panels had direct control of the justice system. Therefore, public will of majority randomly violated citizens' freedom of speech and belief, and even their lives. Thirdly, this democracy is actually a pattern of prerogative one which tolerated the existence of discrimination and slavery. In Athens, only the adult male citizens (about one tenth of the total population) had their public rights, but women, children, foreigners and slaves were excluded from citizenship.

Rather, Socrates' execution was actually the judgment on the state itself. Athenians were generally tolerant of a man's speech and opinions, and the death penalty for talking was not a common punishment. The rise, triumph, and decline of the Athenian democracy accompanied the whole life of Socrates, who keenly and bitterly realized its fatal flaws. Then, Socrates decided to become the gadfly of Athens — a first-class pain; a gadfly is a fly that stings or annoys livestock. Athens became the classroom of Socrates, although he was not a democrat or an egalitarian. He openly criticized the tendency of the democracy to entrust tasks of professional competence to amateurs chosen by popularity or, worse still, by lot. Socrates was trying to arouse drowsy, apathetic people to realize that they did not know themselves, and did not know what they claimed to know. However, the conclusion and aftermath of the Peloponnesian War left Athenian democrats bitter and resentful. The Athenians had lost their self-confidence and their ability to tolerate what they did not understand. The horrors brought on by the Thirty Tyrants caused Athenians to look at Socrates in a new light. His teachings no longer seemed so harmless. He was no more a lovable town eccentric.

Socrates — and his icy logic — came to be seen as a dangerous and corrupting influence, a breeder of tyrants and enemy of the common men. Athens could have let Socrates die of old age, but it chose instead to execute him at about seventy. Faithful to his convictions and obedient to the law of the democracy, Socrates chose to accept his sentence. In 399 B.C., Socrates was dead, which was indeed the last tragedy of ancient Greece. Sixty-one years later, the Macedonian army crushed down the whole Greece.

The power of the state to kill Socrates is always remained. The history has showed us how to construct the future — in a democracy expanding times we should review the Athens democracy. On the day of his execution, Socrates utters the memorable line: “The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways — I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows[7].” Therefore, we should assess this democratic system objectively. On the one hand, we must admit its advance in the ancient world. On the other hand, it also has many limitations. Only in this way can we fully understand democracy and build the modern democratic politics better. From the death of Socrates and others, we can arrive at a precious illustration: social problems can’t be cured simply by democracy itself, modern democracy should be implemented in the frame of law. What we have built now is an indirect or representative democracy in which the democracy is limited, free and just because it can guarantee the citizens’ individual freedom better.

### **The Sociological Meaning.**

In general, most Western scholars have admitted that ancient Greek mythology profoundly influenced Greek philosophy. Homer and his heroes occurred in Plato’s dialogues, repeatedly. Actually, Socrates’ agreement with Achilles on destiny as well as the death of Achilles indicates that Socrates died for profound cultural reasons. Therefore, we should analyze Socrates’ death from the angle of ancient Greek culture. Homer, a great mentor of the Greece, took “Achilles’ rage” as the theme of his epic *Iliad*[8]. The heroes depicted and eulogized in the *Iliad* were totally images of individualism. The *Iliad* stressed the personal function in the social historical process and decisive influence on important events. Achilles, the great Greek hero, captured Briseis and kept her as a concubine, but Agamemnon took her away. Achilles was raged, and refused to fight, which made the allied army of Greek states suffered serious losses. In fact, the conflicts between Achilles and Agamemnon were the clashes between the two politics of democracy and autocracy. Achilles’ rage is actually an early representation of Western individualism.

Concerning the philosopher Socrates, everyone should become well-acquainted with this extraordinarily ethical, courageous, and eccentric person, no more unusual or worthy human being ever lived. The polis (city-state) was all political, economical, social, cultural, and religious focus of Athens. Socrates, the self-appointed gadfly of Athens, often considered himself a midwife in the labor of knowledge. He stood on common ground with the Sophists in refusing to acknowledge any self-evident authority in traditional Greek theological and moral ideals. Yet he differed from them in that his skepticism was methodological rather than radical; he believed that valid moral ideals could ultimately be grounded rationally, although the effort might be long and arduous. The only life worth living, he insisted, was the one based on values formulated through rigorous, honest, and personal self-examination. Through such individual self-examination alone might come about eventual moral regeneration in the state. Although a patriot and a man of deep religious conviction, Socrates was nonetheless regarded with suspicion by many of his contemporaries, who disliked his attitude toward the Athenian state and the established religion. Pathetically and fortunately, Socrates accepted that an individual citizen — even when the victim of unjust treatment — could never be justified in refusing to obey the laws of the state. Here, Socrates’ scarce individualism temporarily gave way to the city-state’s collectivism, but he argued that the good life is the one illuminated by reason and his passion for self-consistency was evident even in his death: ultimately condemned for impiety, he decided to accept the lawful sentence of the democracy — and so remain true to his principles and teaching — rather than made good an easy escape. By drinking a cup of hemlock according to a customary procedure of execution, Socrates slept forever together with his regret and dream for philosophy and democracy.

Individualism, the core and leading value of modern Western civilization, indeed originated from the ancient Greek polis, which ablated individual features, but made the people get equality and rights in their public fields for the first time in the human history. From Socrates' death, we witness a sober and sound individualism, which holds that an individual is the primary unit of reality and the ultimate standard of value. This view does not deny that societies exist or that people benefit from living in them, but it sees society as a collection of individuals, not something over and above them. The true and typical characteristic of individualism is the advocating of individual rights and freedom. What's more, individualism pays special attention to democracy and equality as well as it values the others and their rights at the same time. Our present time is just an age of the individual. Western individualism has nothing to do with the extreme or unsound individualism, to say nothing of egoism in China today. We hope that the Chinese people could have a better understanding and form a fair estimation of the Western individualism from Socrates' death.

## Conclusion

Socrates, with Plato and Aristotle, is the founder of the Western intellectual tradition. He developed a philosophy which, through his own teachings and the teachings of his immediate followers, especially Plato and Aristotle, eventually won the attention and respect of thinking men everywhere. It is well-known that Socrates made two fundamental contributions to Western philosophy by shifting the focus of Greek philosophy from cosmology to ethics and developing the "Socratic method" of inquiry[9]. If Jesus' death was for "salvation", then Socrates' death was just for "martyrdom"[10]. Just as Jesus needed the cross to fulfill his mission, Socrates also needed the hemlock to fulfill his. Most scholars see the conviction and execution of Socrates as a deliberate choice made by the famous philosopher himself, too. Without the fire of Socrates' death for foil, there would not be the advent of Plato's ideal realm. The philosophical, political, and sociological significance of Socrates' death advances with the same pace of the development of mankind science and closely connects with human's thought for their own destiny. Every age has to recreate its own Socrates; as long as intellectual and moral integrity are human ideals, Socrates will be an appropriate exemplar of them. Socrates was already dead centuries ago, but in many senses he is still alive among us.

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