

Socrates by Leo Rosten

¹HE WAS 70 YEARS OLD—squat, potbellied and baldheaded, with an absurd pug nose and an unkempt beard. Even in winter, he wore nothing but a cloak—no shoes, no shirt, no underwear. He had the merriest of dispositions; no one had ever seen him angry or petty or unkind. He was very brave: he had served as a foot soldier in four battles.

²He was a philosopher. He did nothing but talk—talk to anyone who would listen to him, in the streets and harbor and marketplaces, discussing philosophy, which means everything under the sun, with students or sailors or tradesmen, questioning men about what they believed in, and why—always why—and how they could prove it. He punched holes in every argument; he dissected the big, grand words that come lightly to the tongue, words like justice, freedom, wisdom and reality. He met every answer with a new question, and each answer after that with another question, and yet another, and another, until a man's head was ready to burst. He made what seemed obvious seem preposterous because he demolished the comforting clichés by which most of us live. No subject, however hallowed, escaped his antiseptic analysis, or the withering fire of his cross-examination. He was brilliant, profound—and infuriating.

³Some Athenians called him a crackpot (he had once remained transfixed in thought for 24 hours), a dangerous idler who did nothing but engage “in irony and jest on mankind.” The Oracle at Delphi had called him the wisest man alive, but Socrates, with his customary cool skepticism, sighed that his wisdom lay only in this: that unlike other men, he knew how great was his ignorance.

⁴He refused to accept a penny for teaching. Indeed, he denied that he could ever teach anyone anything; he said he only exhorted men to think, to think so hard and so stubbornly that they could surmount

illusion and falsity and glittering nonsense. Virtue, he said, is knowledge. Morals, he said, must be rooted in reason.

⁵Athens was in the throes of adversity. Socrates' friend Alcibiades had betrayed the Athenians to the warrior-state of Sparta. Another friend, Critias, had led a brief reign of terror after Sparta's victory. And now Socrates' enemies cried that it was his endless, damnable hairsplitting and paradoxes that were undermining respect for democracy itself. They said he was so clever that “he made the weaker argument defeat the stronger,” that he made young minds doubt, if not mock, everything from the sacred mysteries to the established order. This meddlesome, sardonic prattler was clearly subversive—“denying the gods recognized by the state” and “corrupting the young.” And these, in fact, were the exact charges for which he was now on trial.

⁶How did he defend himself? “I owe a greater obedience to God than to you, gentlemen,” he said. “So long as I draw breath, I shall never stop elucidating the truth before everyone I meet, asking, ‘Are you not ashamed to pursue money . . . and give no thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?’ I shall not alter my conduct even if I must die a hundred deaths. For God has appointed me to act the gadfly . . . Death does not matter; what matters is that I should do no wrong.”

⁷They voted him guilty. The prosecutor demanded the death penalty. Under the law of Athens, it was now for the defendant to propose an alternative. Socrates could suggest that he be exiled; he knew the Council would leap to accept the compromise. Instead, he proposed that the government reward him—for urging Athenians to search for truth. “Some of you will say, ‘But surely, Socrates, you can mind your own business?’ But I cannot. “Life unexamined is not worth living.”

⁸Angered by his intractability, the Council condemned him to death. To which

Socrates replied, “I have refused to address you in the way which would have flattered you, repenting, weeping, throwing myself on your sympathy, saying things I consider unworthy. For I would rather die as the result of the defense I made than live as the result of the other . . . Nothing can harm a good man, in life or in death . . . Now it is time to go—I to die and you to live; which of us is the happier is not known to anyone but God.”

⁹His frantic friends arranged to smuggle him out of prison, but he refused to escape the price a man must pay for refusing to compromise his values. When his wife Xantippe broke into hysterics in the death cell, he sent her and his sons away. He spent his last hours discussing, with undiminished delight, the problems that had always intrigued him: good and evil; ethics and honor and duty; how the senses can deceive us; what ennobles man and what de- means him; how to test the truth of a proposition, or prove a point, or expose a lazy assumption or a pat conclusion. When his disciples saw the dignity with which he drank the cup of hemlock, they wept. . . The poison paralyzed his limbs and reached his heart.

¹⁰This frog-eyed, incorruptible man, this man who pestered everyone by asking, “Why?” “How do you know?” “What is the evidence?”, This man who forced men to use their brains, this man who was obsessed with reason and driven by a passion for inquiry, this man who mocked hokum and annihilated platitudes, who fought ignorance and easy answers—this Socrates launched a revolution in human history. He dared enthrone reason above tradition. He taught men the marvelous victories that can be won by the free mind alone. He preached that honor lies not in obedience to authority, but in the fearless pursuit of truth. And in propagating the idea that truth is above politics, and conscience beyond law, he paved the way for Christianity itself.

¹¹We are, all of us, descended from him—from Saint Paul to Martin Luther to Einstein. The questions he raised dominated philosophy for 2,000 years. The *Socratic* method of questioning and teaching has never been surpassed. And wherever men today pursue truth, or are ready to die for intellectual freedom, wherever men assert the holy right to think, to argue, to challenge, to debate—in the conviction that life unexamined is indeed not worth living— they are following the example of that ugly saint who never wrote a word. His ideas were immortalized by Plato, who called him “the bravest, wisest, most just man of all we know.” —LEO ROSTEN

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