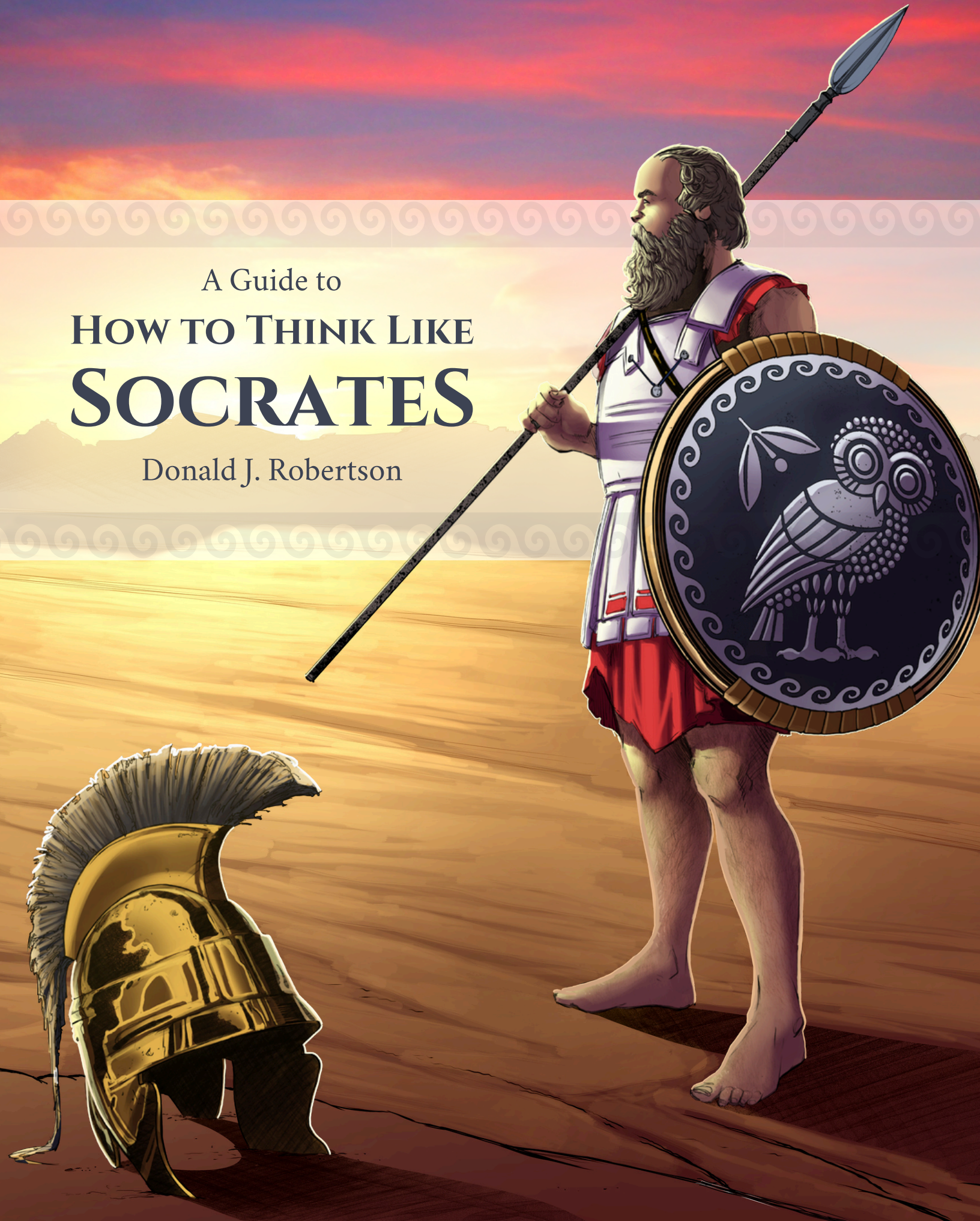


A Guide to  
**HOW TO THINK LIKE  
SOCRATES**

Donald J. Robertson





“There are certain tiny creatures that can bite or sting us, without even being noticed. We feel nothing, and no wound is visible. Only much later do we discover, to our surprise, an itch or swelling where it seems we must have been bitten. You once told me, Socrates, that would be my experience when dealing with the wise.”

—*How to Think Like Socrates*







# INTRODUCTION

Hello and welcome to this special guide, written to accompany my book *How to Think Like Socrates*, published by St Martin's Press. Even if you've not read the book yet, you'll find lots of valuable and interesting information in this short booklet. It also provides useful material for high-school students and book clubs to discuss.

The guide is divided into the following sections:

1. **Key Events** – Some of the occurrences that shaped Socrates' life and thought.
2. **Key Characters** – The most important characters in *How to Think Like Socrates*.
3. **Practical Advice** – Summarizing the main self-help techniques described in the book.
4. **What Next?** – Suggested questions and recommended reading for further study.

*How to Think Like Socrates* combines three genres: history, philosophy, and psychology. It tells a semi-fictional story about the life of Socrates, and the development of his philosophy, although one very closely based upon the accounts we find in ancient sources. Each chapter describes a different part of his biography, linking his life to the political events unfolding in Greece around him. Chapters also include a dramatized philosophical discussion, based on the Socratic dialogues of Plato and Xenophon. Finally, these are linked to psychological self-help techniques based on modern cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT).

It's unusual for a psychotherapist to write about Socrates but I see him, in some ways, as the earliest forerunner of modern cognitive therapy – especially when he questions his friends in order to alleviate their anger toward others. We can obtain several additional psychological insights from him today. I tried to write the sort of book that my younger self would have loved reading and from which he would have benefitted the most. I hope that you find the story of Socrates as inspiring as I do and that it leaves you with the same sort of burning questions, about the most important things in life.

Yours faithfully,





## KEY EVENTS

### THE TRIAL OF SOCRATES

The book opens in 399 BCE with the infamous trial of Socrates. So it starts at the end of his life, before returning to his early years. Socrates was placed on trial, under the Athenian democracy, for “impiety and corrupting the youth.” He was found guilty and sentenced to death by a jury of 501 citizens. After being kept in prison for about a month, his execution delayed by a religious festival, Socrates was eventually required to drink hemlock. Plato, his most famous student, wrote an account of the trial known as the *Apology*, which is perhaps the most moving and influential text in the history of philosophy. Socrates’ dignity and fearlessness, and his unwavering commitment to the pursuit of truth, became an inspiration to generations of young philosophers.

### THE TRIAL OF ANAXAGORAS

The date and details of Anaxagoras’ trial are uncertain but toward the beginning of Socrates’ philosophical studies, he was certainly exposed to the teachings of Anaxagoras and his followers. The alleged trial of Anaxagoras, at Athens, for impiety would have shaped Socrates’ experience of his own trial on similar charges. Anaxagoras is portrayed by some ancient sources as a broken man, who died in exile, following the humiliation of being found guilty. Socrates had decades to prepare himself to face a similar challenge with greater composure and, arguably, to respond in a way that left Athenians with a better example of how a philosopher might face injustice and the threat of exile or execution.

### THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

The Peloponnesian War (431 - 404 BCE) took place between Athens and her allies, known as the Delian League, and Sparta and her allies, known as the Peloponnesian League. It is named after the Peloponnesian peninsula, forming the south of mainland Greece, in which Sparta and most of her allies were located. Athens was the dominant naval power at the time whereas Sparta had the most formidable land army. The war broke out under Pericles and the fighting continued, punctuated by the temporary Peace of Nicias. Socrates fought as a hoplite, or heavy infantryman, in three major battles of the Peloponnesian War, and his philosophical career takes place in parallel to, and intertwined with, the unfolding political events of this epic conflict.



*Pythia, Priestess of Delphi, by John Collier*



## THE ORACLE'S PRONOUNCEMENT

Although Plato's *Apology* presents this as a defining moment in Socrates' philosophical development, historians are unsure when this event took place and some even believe it could be fictional. Nevertheless, we're told that Chaerephon traveled to Delphi, a few days from Athens, where a famous temple of Apollo was located. He reputedly asked the Pythia, or priestess of Apollo, through whom the god was believed to speak, whether any man was wiser than Socrates and, according to Plato, she replied: no man is wiser than Socrates. (Xenophon gives a slightly different account.) Perplexed by this answer, Socrates dedicated his life to questioning those who purported to be wise in order to test whether they in fact possessed wisdom. He consistently found that others, especially those who believed themselves wise, tended to contradict themselves and could therefore not be called wise. He therefore concluded, paradoxically, that the Oracle was right in the sense that although Socrates lacked wisdom himself, he was at least wiser than other men insofar as he understood that he was not wise.

## THE SICILIAN EXPEDITION

The fragile Peace of Nicias ended when Alcibiades convinced the Assembly of Athens to launch a military expedition to the distant island of Sicily. Alcibiades wanted to lead a small fleet to aid Athenian allies on the island in their conflict against the powerful city of Syracuse, which was allied to Sparta. Instead, the Assembly voted to send the largest and best-equipped fleet of the war, placed under the joint command of Alcibiades, Nicias, and another general. Shortly after their arrival in the region, Alcibiades was recalled by his political rivals to face trial in Athens. Instead, he fled into exile in Sparta, and subsequently Persia. Nicias took command of the expedition, which grew even larger with the arrival of reinforcements. It ended in a catastrophic defeat for Athens after a talented Spartan general was sent to advise the Syracusans. Athens and her allies reputedly lost forty thousand men, and many ships, leaving the city in a much weaker position during the final years of the war.

## THE CIVIL WAR

The Sicilian disaster was followed by a coup at Athens, which replaced the democracy with an oligarchic regime, in which only the wealthier citizens had a political voice. However, the remaining Athenian fleet, moored at the island of Samos, was mainly crewed by poorer citizens and remained loyal to the democracy. This led to a brewing civil war between the Oligarch generals who controlled Athens and the Democrat generals stationed at Samos. Before the Democrats could launch an attack to reclaim Athens, Alcibiades was recalled from exile and led them in a series of naval victories against Sparta, which promised to turn the war around. Alcibiades eventually succeeded in uniting two rival Athenian fleets under the command of the moderate Oligarch general, Theramenes, and the Democrat general, Thrasybulus. The Spartan fleet was destroyed, which led to democracy being restored at Athens and the return to Athens of Alcibiades, hailed as the savior of the city.

## THE THIRTY TYRANTS

After setting sail in command of a new Athenian fleet, Alcibiades was once again placed on trial by his political enemies at Athens and stripped of his command. The generals they elected to replace him scored some initial victories but ended up making a catastrophic mistake, which led to the final destruction of the Athenian fleet. Sparta was now able to blockade Athens, which had no option but to surrender. A military junta, composed of oligarchs, known as the Thirty Tyrants, was placed in control of the city, under the leadership of Critias, a former student of Socrates who had turned against him. The Thirty, concerned that Socrates was questioning their authority, repeatedly tried to have him executed, and would, perhaps, have done so had they not been overthrown by an uprising, which succeeded in restoring democratic rule.



## KEY CHARACTERS

### SOCRATES

Socrates is arguably the most influential figure in the history of Western philosophy. He was executed in 399 BCE at the age of just over seventy, so he's generally believed to have been born around 470 BCE. His father was a stonemason and sculptor called Sophroniscus and his mother, Phaenarete, was a midwife and matchmaker. Socrates was born into the hoplite class, who provided heavy infantry for the Athenian citizen army. As such, he would have been an upper middle class Athenian citizen, although he appears to have lived in relative poverty, at least compared to other men of his social class. At some point, Socrates left his father's workshop to focus on the pursuit of wisdom. He was initially drawn to the natural philosophy of Anaxagoras but later developed his own method, which addressed moral concepts relevant to daily life. He employed a form of dialectical reasoning, or question-and-answer, which became known as the Socratic Method, and profoundly influenced the subsequent history of Western philosophy.

### CHAEREPHON

Chaerephon was one of Socrates' closest friends and appears to have been a fellow philosopher. He was a gaunt but highly animated figure, compared to a bat or specter. However, he was held in high regard by other Athenians and accompanied the Democrats into exile during the political purges of the Thirty Tyrants. It was Chaerephon who obtained the pronouncement from the Delphic Oracle that no man is wiser than Socrates. He died not long before Socrates' trial.

### PERICLES

Athenian general and statesman, who was the leading figure in the politics of the region during the height of Athens' political power. Although Pericles was an elected general, he held such personal authority that he

became the de facto ruler of an Athenian empire. During his time in office, the Assembly became increasingly divided into two opposing political factions. The Democrats, led by Pericles, wanted the poorer citizens of Athens to have a political voice, whereas the Oligarchs, their rivals, sought to focus power in the hands of the wealthier citizens and hereditary nobility. Pericles died of the plague in 429 BCE, about two years into the Peloponnesian War.

## ANAXAGORAS

The first philosopher to teach at Athens. He came from Ionia and brought the doctrines of natural philosophy. Anaxagoras became an advisor to Pericles and his circle. He was reputedly placed on trial for impiety and forced into exile, where he died. Socrates' initial exposure to philosophy was probably, in part, through reading the book of Anaxagoras, although he came to see natural philosophy as an inadequate source of wisdom.

## PROTAGORAS

The first great Sophist, or self-proclaimed "wise man," who came to Athens from Abdera, was an advisor to Pericles, and also his political envoy. Protagoras delivered a popular course of lectures, for which he charged a hefty fee. He claimed to be able to teach virtue, as well as showing young men how to win arguments, through skill in rhetoric and oratory. Socrates, according to Plato, had a famous conversation with him, and they seem to have had some respect for one another, despite their disagreements.

## ASPASIA

A noblewoman and intellectual from Ionia, who became the courtesan, and later perhaps the wife, of Pericles. She is associated with Socrates and may have been his friend or perhaps even mentor. Some modern scholars believe the figure of Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*, a mysterious female philosopher, is based upon her. Aspasia appears to have been skilled in rhetoric, and perhaps a form of philosophy, but Socrates also describes her as an expert on matchmaking, like his mother.

## ALCIBIADES

Athenian nobleman and close associate, perhaps even lover, of Socrates. Aspasia was his great aunt. Alcibiades became the ward of Pericles as a small child, after his father was slain in battle. Alcibiades was a controversial figure, renowned as much for his beauty and charisma as for his political ambition. After being elected general he became entangled in the Scandal of the Herms and was forced to flee into exile, leaving the Sicilian Expedition effectively under the command of Nicias. Although accused of treason, after associating with the Spartans and Persians, Alcibiades only ever fought on the side of the Athenian democracy. He was praised for averting civil war by persuading the Democrat and Oligarch factions at Athens to join forces in battle against the Spartans. Nevertheless, he was eventually stripped of his command by his enemies and, after the fall of Athens, he was assassinated while in exile.



*Socrates with Aspasia by Honore Daumier*



## CLEON

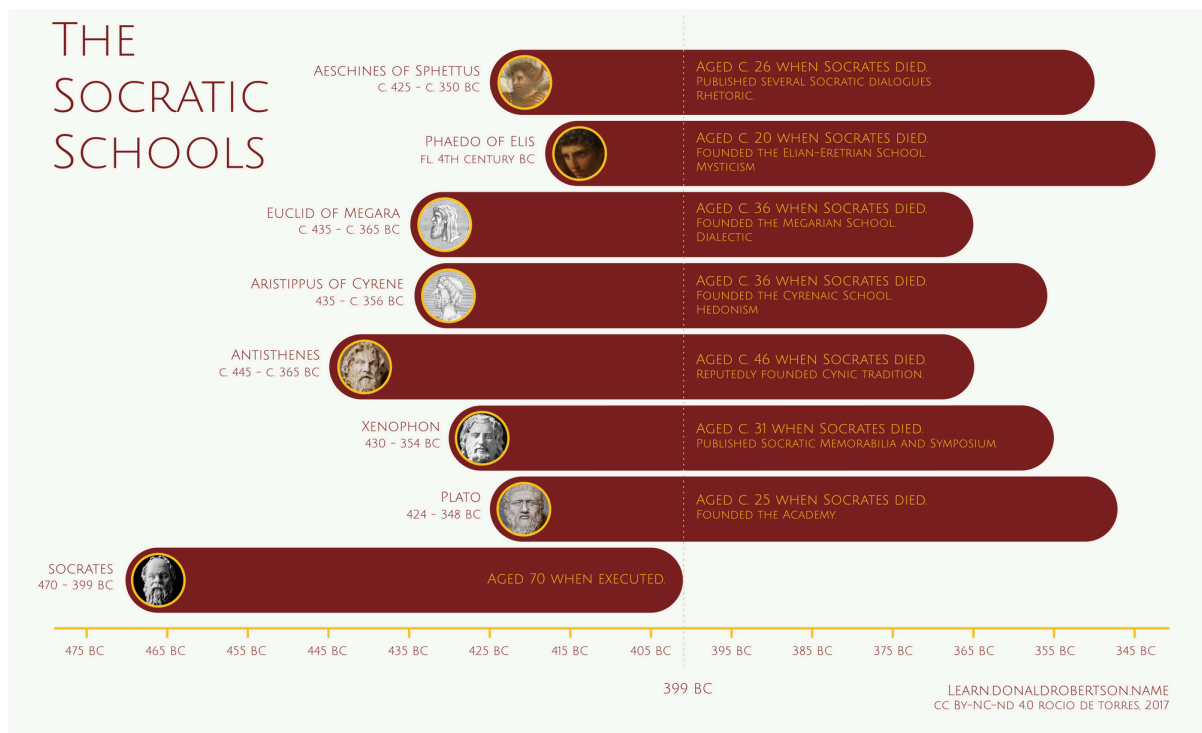
The most notorious demagogue in Athens. A rival of Pericles, after the latter's unexpected death, Cleon quickly rose to become one of the most influential statesmen in Athens despite his lack of military or political experience. His coarse rhetoric and attacks on establishment figures made him popular, although he was also dogged by accusations of corruption. Eager to prove himself, after some initial good fortune, he instigated two ill-fated military expeditions. Socrates served as a hoplite in the battles of Delium and Amphipolis, during which Cleon was killed. His death gave his rival Nicias an opportunity to negotiate peace with the Spartans but also cleared the way for the rise of Alcibiades to greater influence in the Assembly.

## NICIAS

Nicias was an elected Athenian general who rose to greater prominence following the death of Pericles to become the political opponent of Cleon and subsequently Alcibiades. He was a conservative, who was reluctant to continue hostilities against Sparta. This was perhaps because his wealth came from the lucrative silver mines at nearby Laurium, revenue from which was threatened by the Spartan occupation of the surrounding region. After Alcibiades fled into exile, Nicias took command of the Sicilian expedition, which resulted in a catastrophic military disaster from which Athens never fully recovered.

## CRITIAS

Critias was an Athenian noble and intellectual, with Spartan sympathies, who was initially a friend of Alcibiades, and a student of Socrates, although they later became estranged. He was eventually the leader of the oligarchy, known as the Thirty Tyrants, put into power by the Spartans after the fall of Athens. Critias earned a reputation as a cruel tyrant, who began rounding up and executing his political opponents, subjecting Athens to a period of terror, until he was killed and the Thirty were overthrown in the Democrat uprising led by Thrasylbulus, a Democrat general and ally of Alcibiades.







# PRACTICAL ADVICE

“When the soul is thinking, it is doing nothing other than conversing with itself, asking itself questions and answering, affirming and denying. When it has arrived at a decision, whether slowly or with a sudden bound, and is at last agreed, and is not in doubt, we call that its opinion; and so I define forming opinion as talking and opinion as talk which has been held, not with someone else, nor yet aloud, but in silence with oneself.”

—*Socrates in Plato's Theaetetus*

## THE SOCRATIC METHOD

The Socratic Method is a complex and subtle process and set of skills, which Socrates uses throughout the dialogues of Plato and Xenophon. Although he never defines it in a very explicit manner, we can see that his trademark method typically involves a form of philosophical dialogue, which consists in posing certain questions. Socrates normally begins by asking his “interlocutor” (the other person in a dialogue) how they would define some important concept, usually a virtue such as courage or justice. He then proceeds to identify situations which exemplify the concept but don't fit their definition, forcing them to keep revising it.

In one of Xenophon's dialogues, Socrates actually teaches the basic skill underlying the Socratic Method to a young man by using a formal written exercise. He draws two columns, one titled justice and the other injustice. (Although any pair of opposing concepts could be used.) Socrates asks his companion to list examples of injustice in the second column. He then proceeds to come up with examples of situations in which these should be moved across to the first column instead. For example, at first they agree that stealing is morally wrong, and an example of injustice. However, Socrates asks whether an elected general who lies to the enemy is acting unjustly or not. They agree that this should be considered an exception and can be placed instead in the column headed justice. This process can go on almost indefinitely, encouraging us to think creatively and flexibly about exceptions to our definitions and other verbal rules. The ability to escape from tunnel vision by viewing situations from different perspectives is known as “cognitive flexibility,” and is believed to play an important part in mental health today.

## VALUES CLARIFICATION

Socrates believed that we should spend our time engaging in philosophical dialogues, with our friends and other people, about the most important questions in life. “The unexamined life is not worth living,” he said. For the most part, he applied his philosophical method to examining what is “good” for us, or the goal of life, and virtues such as wisdom and justice, which appear integral to our flourishing. Modern cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) has increasingly placed emphasis, likewise, on clarifying our values, particularly those that relate to the character traits we most admire, rather than the achievement of external outcomes, such as wealth or reputation. Ask yourself what you want your life to stand for and how much time you spend each day actually doing things that exemplify the values you place most importance upon. How would your life change if you were to become more like the people whose characters you most admire?

## THE GOLDEN RULE

The Golden Rule is a famous ethical guideline derived from the Christian saying that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us. However, variations of it have been found in most major religious and philosophical traditions, including the Socratic dialogues – four centuries *before* Christianity. Socrates is repeatedly shown questioning contradictions in his friends' moral thinking, including the tendency to apply one standard to their own conduct and another to that of other people. We call this the “double standards” strategy in modern CBT. Socrates also advises his friends to take the initiative and behave toward others as they would like others to behave toward them, e.g., becoming a good friend so that they are more likely to attract good friends in life – something he compares to a love charm or magic spell.

## COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

In Plato's dialogue called the *Protagoras*, Socrates is depicted engaging in a complex, and at times tense, philosophical dialogue with the great Sophist of the same name. While discussing the nature of courage, Socrates explains that fear can be understood as a type of *belief*, concerning what is most painful or harmful to us, and whether it is appropriate to face or avoid such situations. Socrates notes that we often fear the wrong situations because events that are more distant in time affect our motivation less than ones that are imminent, a cognitive bias called “temporal discounting” by modern psychologists. He goes on to describe our need for a method of “rational measurement,” regarding pain and pleasure, which could guide our actions. Socrates almost seems to be discovering a form of cognitive-behavioral therapy, before our very eyes, which is known today as Problem-Solving Training (PST). PST involves learning to weigh up the pros and cons of different solutions, considering their short and longer-term consequences, before deciding in a calm rational manner what course of action is most likely to lead to our goal.

## ILLEISM

One of Socrates' students said that the main thing he learned from him was how to converse with himself. What could he have meant? Plato says, in the *Theaetetus*, that when Socrates arrived home after engaging in philosophical dialogues with his friends, etc, he continued the conversation in his imagination, as if there was another Socrates questioning him. Likewise, in Plato's *Crito*, Socrates imagines the Laws of Athens questioning him: “Answer, Socrates, instead of staring blankly: you are in the habit of asking and answering questions.” In fact, Socrates is often shown engaging in such *hypothetical* dialogues, at times questioning himself as if he were questioning another person, and referring to himself by name.

The psychologist Igor Grossman is the head of a department researching wisdom at the University of Waterloo. He and his colleagues have found that a similar technique they called “distanced self-reflection,” in which problems are described in the third person, resulted in thinking that scored higher on measures of wisdom. This method is a form of what is sometimes called illeism, derived from *ille*, a Latin third-person pronoun. Illeism is when you talk about yourself using your name or pronouns such as “he” or “him”. For example, instead of “I am worried about paying my taxes”, I would say “*Donald* is worried about paying *his* taxes”. In addition to improving our ability to reason clearly, and solve problems, illeism has been found to reduce negative emotions such as anxiety and is sometimes used in CBT for this reason.

## COGNITIVE DEFUSION

Aaron T. Beck, the founder of cognitive therapy, employed a technique he called “Socratic questioning,” having studied Plato’s *Republic* in college. Beck’s method of questioning, rather than focusing on highlighting contradictions in his clients’ thinking, also asked them “Where’s the evidence?” for and against their negative thoughts and unhelpful beliefs. However, Beck noticed that before people were ready to question their own beliefs they first had to be able to view them from a detached perspective, in which thoughts are seen as *hypotheses*, up for debate, and not facts, fused with reality. Beck compared this to someone wearing colored spectacles, such as ones with sad blue lenses. Beck referred to our ability to separate the color of the lenses from external events as “cognitive distancing.” He describes it as looking at the lenses instead of through them. (The terms “cognitive defusion” and “verbal defusion” are also used by psychologists today.)

Whereas Beck saw that as an important prerequisite to cognitive therapy, the next generation of CBT researchers began to view it as an important therapeutic intervention in its own right. Although people often notice that by adopting this perspective they can reduce the intensity of negative emotions such as fear or anger, this strategy also increases cognitive flexibility by allowing you to view problems in several different ways, which contributes to improved problem-solving in the longer term. There are many ways of achieving this effect. For instance, by repeating thoughts aloud very rapidly or doing the opposite and slowing our thinking down, and introducing more pauses, we can become more aware of the thoughts themselves. The same idea is implicit in Epictetus’ famous saying that “People are upset not by events but by their judgments about them.” However, Socrates seems to have been aware of this notion and in the dialogues of both Plato and Xenophon, we find references to the way in which our beliefs shape our emotions.

## THINKING ERRORS

Cognitive therapy emphasizes asking “Where’s the evidence?” for negative automatic thoughts. However, Beck also encouraged clients to spot errors of reasoning, similar to informal logical fallacies of the kind addressed in philosophical dialogue. Many different types of “thinking errors” (aka “cognitive distortions”) are identified in CBT. However, Beck originally divided them into four broad categories:

- **Selective thinking**, which ignores or discounts important information, and focuses exclusively on negative thoughts. For instance, if a friend appears to insult you, you may become angry by focusing on that, while ignoring many nice things they’ve said in the past.
- **Unfounded assumptions**, such as what therapists call “fortune telling,” where we jump to conclusions about the future, or “mind reading,” where we assume what other people are thinking without sufficient evidence.
- **Extreme thinking**, such as exaggerating threats and trivializing our ability to cope, or viewing people in black-and-white terms, by either idealizing them as friends or demonizing them as our enemies. For instance, anxious worry tends to be dominated by a form of extreme thinking called “catastrophizing,” in which the severity of a perceived threat is blown out of proportion.
- **Overgeneralization**, where, based on limited evidence, we conclude that something always happens or never happens. For instance, if I’m depressed, and I fail at some task, I may make myself feel worse by thinking “I never succeed at anything.”

By learning to spot these errors in our own thinking, we can gain cognitive defusion. Noticing our biases makes us more aware of the distinction between appearances and reality. However, it also helps us to avoid being manipulated by other people, such as ancient Sophists or modern politicians, who use rhetoric employing errors such as these as a means of persuasion.

## ANGER AND PERCEIVED INJUSTICE

One of the paradoxes that Socrates was most emphatic about was his claim that injustice harms the perpetrator more than the victim. We don't normally think of our philosophy of justice as something that's linked to mental health. However, there's increasing evidence that "perceived injustice" is correlated with, and may even help to cause, clinical depression. Anger is also believed to often entail the belief that someone has violated a rule, or acted unjustly, and perhaps even that they deserve to be punished. Socrates believed that the injustice of others could not really harm him. They might destroy his reputation, take away his property, throw him in prison, and even have him executed. Nevertheless, they could not harm his moral character, unless he allowed them to do so. For that reason, he did not get angry, or feel depressed, in response to acts of perceived injustice. Even if we don't adopt the radical philosophy of Socrates, you can often help yourself to overcome anger and other negative emotions by contemplating the question: What does me more harm, my anger or the thing that I'm upset about?



## STUDY QUESTIONS

- How would you define "wisdom"?
- How much can we know about the real Socrates based on the sources about him that survive today?
- What is the relationship between the two-column exercise and the Socratic Method?
- Why might some jurors have believed that Socrates was guilty of impiety and corrupting the youth?
- How might our beliefs about the nature of "injustice" be linked to anger or depression?

## RECOMMENDED READING

We have three main ancient sources for the life and philosophy of Socrates: Plato, Xenophon, and Diogenes Laertius. There's a lot to read by Plato, especially as his most famous work, the *Republic*, spans ten "books" (or chapters). We also have surviving Socratic dialogues attributed to Xenophon. In addition, we have short biographies of Socrates and his most famous students written some 500 years later by Diogenes Laertius. Diogenes is less reliable than Plato and Xenophon but nevertheless valuable because he probably had access to other ancient texts, which are lost to us today.



Most people probably try to read Plato's *Republic* first but that can be a daunting task. I would normally recommend starting with the chapter on Socrates in Diogenes Laertius because it's easier to read and provides a good introduction. Here are some other suggestions for reading:

## ANCIENT BOOKS

1. Diogenes Laertius, the chapter on Socrates from *Lives and Opinions*
2. The *Apology* of Plato, and *Apology* of Xenophon
3. The *Symposium* of Plato and *Symposium* of Xenophon
4. Plato's *Euthyphro* and *Crito* – portraying the last days of Socrates, before and after his trial
5. The *Memorabilia* of Xenophon
6. Either more of the early dialogues of Plato or Book 1 of his *Republic*

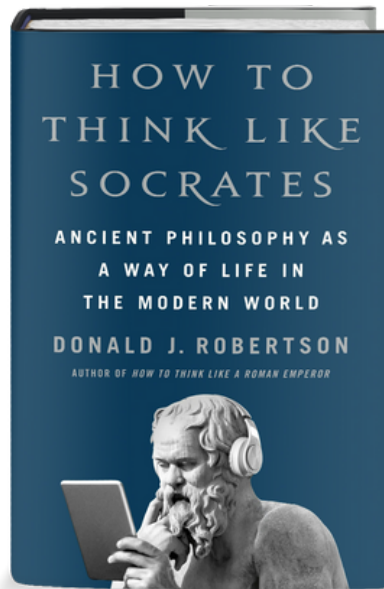
## MODERN BOOKS

- *Socrates: A Very Short Introduction* (2000) by Christopher Taylor. This is a great little introduction to the life and philosophy of Socrates.
- *Socrates: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2009) by Sara Ahbel-Rappe. This is another general introduction to the life and philosophy of Socrates.
- *The Hemlock Cup: Socrates, Athens and the Search for the Good Life* (2011) by Bettany Hughes. An excellent modern biography.
- *Why Socrates Died: Dispelling the Myths* (2009) by Robin Waterfield. Another excellent modern biography.
- *Socrates in Love: The Making of a Philosopher* (2019) by Armand D'Angour. A superb revisionist biography of Socrates, focusing on his early years and relationships with Aspasia and Alcibiades.



# ABOUT “HOW TO THINK LIKE SOCRATES”

*How to Think Like Socrates*, published by St. Martin’s Press, is available from all good bookstores in hardback, ebook, and audiobook format.



“One of the best books ever written on the power and practicality of philosophy for a good and successful life!  
Highly recommended!”

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