

Station E: Law

The Trial Against Socrates

Socrates, A Gifted Teacher

Socrates was a philosopher and a teacher who lived in Athens from 469 to 399 B.C.E. Socrates' basic philosophy was that a person's happiness depends solely on living a moral life. He believed that moral goodness, or *virtue*, was the same as knowledge. He also believed that all evil stemmed from ignorance. Socrates taught his students, or *disciples*, by engaging them in debate and asking them numerous questions. Using this method—which came to be called the Socratic Method—Socrates forced his students to examine their beliefs about the world in search for the general truth. Socrates encouraged his students to question all aspects of life.

The Case Against Socrates

Socrates was a controversial figure in fifth-century Athens because he often criticized Athenian democratic rule. He felt that only the most knowledgeable and good-hearted citizens, or people of *merit*, should govern. His criticisms of the government eventually brought about his downfall.

In 399 B.C.E. Athenian leaders put Socrates on trial for failing to worship the Gods, corrupting the young, and trying to overthrow the government. They believed that Socrates' methods of teaching young people to question every aspect of life was a danger to the democracy. They felt he was leading his disciples to challenge the authority of the government. For instance, four years earlier, one of his students had tried to overthrow the government. Although Socrates had denounced the student, the government leaders severely condemned Socrates for having taught him to criticize democratic rule.

At his trial Socrates defended himself against the charges against him. However, he refused to deny his beliefs or his philosophy. He treated the entire trial with contempt.

Athenian Verdict

The Athenian jury found Socrates guilty and sentenced him to death. His punishment was to drink hemlock, the juice of a poisonous plant.