Socrates Essay, Research Paper

SOCRATES

Socrates was a Greek philosopher who lived between 470-399 B.C. He turned Greek attention toward questions of ethics and virtue and away from those of the heavenly bodies. Socrates spent much time in the Agora (marketplace) where he held conversations with townspeople. Socrates believed that real truth could be found out through thought and collaboration with others. He was known for exposing ignorance, hypocrisy, and conceit. Despite having many followers, Socrates was disliked by most Athenians. At the age of 70, he was convicted of atheism, treason and corruption of the young. He was originally ordered to leave Athens, but chose to drink poison instead. This great man valued the law over his life, and so he chose to drank hemlock over leaving. Socrates is best remembered for his courage and strong moral beliefs which manifested themselves in his lifestyle. Although Socrates did not dwell much on the heavenly bodies, his beliefs that searching could bring about understanding of the world and humans in it laid a foundation that is still very much a part of modern science.

In the course of Western Civilization, there have been two trials ending in a sentence of death imposed upon two individuals later deemed grossly unfair and unjust by the verdict of history. One trial was that of Jesus Christ, the other that of Socrates it was Jesus’ destiny, and It was Socrates’ choice. Both philosophers and theologians, carry a political message, a message apt to rub the ruling power structure’s nose in its own mess. Christ defined and built a new moral order. All Socrates ever accomplished was questioning and probing the democratic beliefs of his day. He refused to define proper behavior and what should be done by government. Socrates did not build anything or write nothing; instead he strove to destroy the legitimacy of free men ruling themselves, Both Christ and Socrates were killed at the orders of lesser men for what they said. The story of Jesus Christ and the world in which he lived are well known. Now let us look at Socrates, the world’s first “intellectual” and the stage he acted upon.

Socrates was the town character. While a member of the middle class, he was on good terms with Pericles, the ruling aristocrat voted the first strategos (general) for over 30 years. Socrates, the perfect snob, surrounded himself with the gilded aristocratic youth of Athens. But there is a limit to even the most patient of governments. When a legitimate government is strong, it can afford to ignore pinpricks of ridicule. But after Athens lost her empire by losing the Peloponnesian War and had undergone two oligarchic reigns of terror at the hands of the gilded, Socratified rich kids, her patience with Socrates ended.

Socrates was charged in 399 B.C. with “impiety against the gods of the city” and with “corrupting the young.” He was guilty on all counts. Socrates’ basic premise of government — according to Xenophon’s “Memorabilia” — was “that it is the business of the ruler to give orders and of the ruled to obey.” So the ruler should have total, unaccounted power. The second charge against Socrates, that he had corrupted the youth of Athens, was even more damning. The foremost examples of the gilded youth he led astray was Alcibiades and Critias, although Socrates’ effect on the rich young aristocratic fops was already mentioned in Aristophanes’ “The Birds,” written in 414 B.C., fifteen years before he was called to account:

Why, till ye built this city in the air, \_\_\_\_\_ line 1280

All men had gone Laconian-mad; they went \_\_ [Spartan-mad]

Long-haired, half-starved, unwashed, Socratified,

With scytales in their hands; but Oh the change!

They are all bird-mad now, and imitate \_\_\_\_ line 1284

Alcibiades was Socrates’ favorite pupil. Socrates saved his life on a battlefield. But the lesson Alcibiades learned from Socrates was that the rulers have no duty to their country; that their ambitions and desires come ahead of the common herd’s well-being and lives. Alcibiades was a Socratified “superman.”

The other pupil of Socrates was Critias. Critias was Plato’s uncle and Plato wrote a dialogue about him. Finally, in 401 B.C., two years before Socrates’ trial and death, a weary, tired peace came to Athens, who had lost a war, her empire, and many of her citizens. Socrates remained in Athens and kept his mouth shut when mildly threatened by his Socratified pupils of The Thirty. Plato does not allude to these matters for some reason. He was 25 years old, military age, and was urged to share in his uncle’s and first cousin’s government, but like so many “intellectuals,” he wussed out. He preferred government by “philosopher-kings” in a book, but never did anything to actually attain it.

Athens put Socrates on trial in 399 B.C. when he was 70, a ripe old age considering the times. If Socrates had put on a defense of demanding that Athens live up to its high ideals, perhaps he might have only been ostracized for ten years, a fate that had happened to both good and bad men before him. But instead, in accordance with his wanting to destroy the moral legitimacy of a free government by using its judicial system to fulfill his death wish, he baited both the jury to find him guilty and to punish him with death. Socrates, who always said that he knew nothing while he asked his destructively critical questions boasted about how the Oracle at Delphi declared that Socrates was the wisest, most free, just, and prudent man in the world. In other words, “I am a fool, but I know I’m a fool and that makes me smarter than you.” The jury convicted him on both counts. Then Socrates asked that his penalty be that he be declared a civic hero and fed at the public table for life! That did not go over too well. The jury, incensed, gave out the death penalty. One of Socrates’ disciples suggested a jailbreak and escape, with the tacit connivance of the authorities who just wanted him gone, but Socrates refused. So he drank the hemlock while he put on the airs of a martyr. After all that he had done for democratic Athens, this is the thanks he got! Christ wept over Jerusalem, but Socrates shed not a tear for Athens. Socrates’ most famous pupil, Plato, figured out the heat was on, so he traveled abroad for 12 years, living on his inherited money. Then when the stink cleared, he gave up his notions of becoming a playwright and instead wrote up numerous books about his leading man, Socrates. He formed an academy, wherein his most gifted student, Aristotle, studied. Of course, Aristotle formed his own conclusions, most of which differed from Plato’s.No philosopher kings for Aristotle! Aristotle’s royal pupil was Alexander the Great.

“Cursed be all those who rejoice to see the city in the hands of a single man or under the yoke of a few men! The name of a freeman is the most precious of titles: to possess it is to have much, even when one has little.”

Yes, cursed be Socrates, Plato, and all the “intellectual” petty Hitlers, Stalins, FDRs and other big-government butt kissers since.

Although he was well known during his own time for his conversational skills and public teaching, Socrates wrote nothing, so we are dependent upon his students (especially Xenophon and Plato) for any detailed knowledge of his methods and results. The trouble is that Plato was himself a philosopher who often injected his own theories into the dialogues he presented for any detailed knowledge of his methods and results