



Arguing to death

A62

LOS ANGELES

From Socrates, history's quintessential nonconformist, lessons for America today

IF THE most famous philosopher of all were alive today, he might find America remarkably similar to his own Athens of the fifth century BC. Socrates would witness a vibrant and proud democracy, and disdain it as an indulgence of the benighted, unphilosophical "herd". He would interrogate America's politicians, talk-radio and cable-television pundits in search of honest discussions that lead to truth, and thereby expose their confusion, contradictions and ignorance. He would avail himself of America's as of Athens's freedom of speech, and simultaneously be horrified by the speciousness of the speech that Americans choose to make. And he would challenge America just as he had provoked Athens, and possibly be prosecuted and condemned for it a second time.

Socrates throws down a gauntlet from antiquity to America and all other democracies. How could Athens, which prided itself on its freedoms and had for decades not only tolerated but delighted in the stings of the man who described himself as its "gadfly", turn on its greatest mind and condemn him to death when he was 70 years old? Had Socrates exposed a terrible flaw in democracy? Or had democracy responded to a mortal threat from the likes of Socrates?

His influence today is usually felt in academia, through the legacy of his ideas. He founded Western philosophy in the sense that all intellectual inquiry before him is deemed to be "pre-Socratic" and all Western philosophy since him, in the words of Alfred North Whitehead, an English philosopher of the early 20th century, mere "footnotes" to the 35 Platonic dialogues in which Socrates was the main character. It was Socrates who made the momentous "turn" of Western thought away from speculation about the composition of the physical world and towards the liberal questions of morality, justice, virtue and politics.

But Socrates casts his influence far beyond academia, beyond even his ideas. His main contributions, arguably, were his method and style as well as the example of his life. His method was to

question one or a few individuals in small settings (the "Apology", which records his address to the 500-man jury at his trial, was the exception). Through such intimate probing he elicited and tested his interlocutors' deepest and most hidden opinions, a process now known as Socratic dialectic. His style during the discussions was "ironic" in the original sense of *eironeia*, meaning that he pretended to be ignorant to prompt his interlocutors to open up.

His life, above all, was dedicated to the love of wisdom (philosophy). His wife, Xanthippe, and three sons lived in near-penury while Socrates loitered around the marketplace of Athens looking for debaters. In the end he sacrificed his life for philosophy when he was offered the opportunity to escape from prison before his execution but chose to swallow hemlock instead.

*Sympathising
with Sparta—
the equivalent
of an American
having kind
words for
Islamic Jihad*

What, then, had Socrates revealed in Athenian democracy that made this martyrdom necessary? And would American democracy be capable of repeating Athens's sin?

The town-hall meeting

Visiting America today, Socrates might have dropped in on last summer's "town hall" meetings, in which members of the public allegedly came to debate the reform of health care with their elected representatives. Socrates would have beheld hysterical firebrands shouting that America's president and senators were Marxists, Nazis or both. Reaffirmed in his disdain for democratic rhetoric, Socrates would have left to seek better conversations, as he used to do in Athens, where he conspicuously shunned the public assembly and the jury courts in which male citizens were expected to serve.

► Socrates considered the debate in such settings unedifying, pointless and unworthy—in a word, “eristic”. Eris was the Greek goddess of strife (the Roman Discordia). It was Eris who cunningly dropped a golden apple with the inscription “to the fairest” into a feast, inciting three goddesses—Hera, Athena and Aphrodite—to bicker over who deserved it and thus launching the ten-year Trojan War. Eris is present in presidential debates, in court rooms and wherever people are talking not to discover truth but to win.

In 1968 Stringfellow Barr, an historian and president of St John’s College in Maryland, wrote a Socratic critique of American discourse: “There is a pathos in television dialogue: the rapid exchange of monologues that fail to find the issue, like ships passing in the night; the reiterated preface, ‘I think that...’, as if it mattered who held which opinion rather than which opinion is worth holding; the impressive personal vanity that prevents each ‘discussant’ from really listening to another speaker”

Socrates’s alternative was “good” conversation or dialectic. To converse originally meant to turn towards one another, in order to find a common humanity and to move closer to the truth of something. Dialectic, in other words, is decidedly not about winning or losing, because all the conversants are ennobled by it. It is a joint search. Unfortunately, as Mr Barr put it, it is also “the most difficult” kind of conversation “especially for Americans to achieve”.

On a good day, Socrates’s conversations bore all the marks of dialectic. There was little long-winded monologue and much pithy back-and-forth. The conversation often meandered and sometimes Socrates contradicted himself. In the “Protagoras”, for example, he argues that virtue cannot be taught but in the “Meno” that it can. The conversations were at times humorous and invariably surprising. He hoped to bring all involved to a higher state of awareness.

Because Socrates wanted to win converts to this conversational culture he often chose young and malleable men who appeared tempted by the eristic rhetoric he believed democracy encouraged. For instance, Socrates tried hard to educate Alcibiades, the hedonistic and ambitious young man whose guardian Pericles was Athens’s greatest statesman. He also went for a long walk in the countryside of Athens (which he hated leaving) with a young man named Phaedrus in order, very gently, to make the youth see the hollowness of a rhetorician he admired.

Socrates as talk-show host

But Socrates also sought out those whom he saw peddling the skills of eristic conversation. These were the travelling teachers who charged wealthy fathers to teach their sons the tools of power, the “sophists” such as Protagoras or Thrasymachus. And there were the rhetoricians. Socrates manoeuvred the most famous of them, Gorgias, into admitting that the aim of rhetoric is “rule over others in one’s city”. Gorgias even boasted that a master rhetorician unqualified in medicine could get himself elected as surgeon general over a qualified doctor who is not rhetorically gifted. In America today, Socrates would recognise sophists and rhetoricians in partisan spin doctors such as Karl Rove and David Axelrod or equally in talk-show hosts such as Sean Hannity and Keith Olbermann.

Using his irony, Socrates would make them feel overconfident, draw them out and then, through his questioning, expose their confusion and ignorance. Often this was done for the benefit of an impressionable young student who was listening. Because such conversations had to be bespoke for the participating individuals, Socrates refused ever to write anything down. As he said in the “Phaedrus”, text remains dumb when

questioned and will be understood or misunderstood depending on who is reading it.

The trouble was that, although his students, including Plato and Xenophon, who passed on Socrates’s conversations for posterity, saw him as noble, much of Athens did not. Instead, many Athenians detected an underlying arrogance in Socratic irony. Socrates thus resembled, say, the wiser-than-thou and often manipulative comedian-commentators Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert in today’s America. Those who agreed with him found him funny and enlightening. The rest found him merely condescending.

Socrates resembled, say, the wiser-than-thou, often manipulative comedian, Jon Stewart

Socrates fed this image of arrogance. In his defence before the jury, he said that he acted on a divine mission from Apollo’s oracle at Delphi in exposing so many as ignorant. In Plato’s version, Socrates claimed that the oracle had said “there is no one wiser”. With this presumed superiority, Socrates set out to prove the oracle wrong. Xenophon’s version is more arrogant yet. “Apollo answered that no man was more free than I, or more just, or more prudent,” Socrates told the jury. “Apollo did not compare me to a god... he did, however, judge that I far excelled the rest of mankind.”

It is a tribute to the Athenians that they mostly embraced such megalomania as a charming quirk. They did, however, mock

it. Aristophanes, a comic playwright who wrapped serious messages in humour—as, say, Sacha Baron Cohen (aka Borat) does today—wrote an entire play, “The Clouds”, to lampoon Socrates.

In that comedy, an old farmer named Strepsiades wants to get out of the debts of his horse-racing son, Pheidippides, and sends him to an eccentric philosopher named Socrates who runs a “thinkery” where students learn to talk themselves out of any situation (sophistry, in other words). The son successfully evades his creditors but also returns with strange ideas. Because Socrates has taught him that wisdom is the only authority, Pheidippides proceeds to beat up his uneducated father, then threatens to do the same to his mother. Angry that his son has been corrupted, Strepsiades burns down Socrates’s school.

The Socrates lampooned in the play, and probably laughing heartily in the audience, was 46 at the time and got on well with Aristophanes. Plato presents both men as having a jolly time together in the “Symposium”. But already in “The Clouds”, there are the familiar charges of Socrates corrupting the young and threatening to subvert society and of being impious. Indeed, Aristophanes has Socrates arguing in his thinkery that “Zeus does not even exist”. Addressing the jury 24 years later, Socrates claimed that this is where the charges originated.

In the coming years, many Athenians, and especially those who had been embarrassed by him, would learn to loathe Socrates. His dialectic was indeed surprisingly negative. Typically, he became obsessed with defining something abstract—What is justice? What is virtue?—and then twisted words to dismantle any opinion offered.

In Xenophon’s “Memorabilia”, a man named Hippias refuses to debate Socrates: “You mock at others, questioning and examining everybody, and never willing to render an account yourself or to state an opinion about anything,” he says. In Plato’s “Meno”, his interlocutor compares Socrates to “the flat torpedo sea-fish; for it benumbs anyone who approaches and touches it.” Socrates had a talent for making people feel bad.

He also, in effect, boycotted Athens as a ►

