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Socrates

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**English
podcast transcript**

Socrates

The Undertaker of any knowledge claim?

English transcript

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DF = Dorothea Frede

ES = Eliane Schmid

ES: Hello and welcome to Wisdom Talks, the podcast accompanying the METIS project, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices, to be found on www.metis.ethz.ch.

My name is Eliane Schmid and I will be hosting today's podcast centered on the famous ignoramus named Socrates. In Western philosophy, he is considered a towering figure, although he left no written work to testify to his theories and thoughts. "I know that I know nothing." This quote is well known throughout the Western world. I know, however, that I would like to know more about Socrates and this quote and what this actually means. Fortunately, Dorothea Frede is here today. She has traveled to Hamburg to be in the studio to talk about what exactly this all means. She's professor emeritus of ancient Western philosophy. Welcome Dorothea, to the studio.

DF: Hello.

ES: There were plenty of thinkers before Socrates, yet Socrates stands out among the ancient Greek philosophers. He is described as a new beginning or sometimes even the beginning of Western philosophy. Not knowing something or not being able to do something is of course the

beginning of any knowledge or skill. So, if Socrates knew nothing or only knew that he knew nothing, how does that set him apart from previous thinkers? Did they know even less?

DF: We'll come to the previous thinkers in a little while, but I have to say, Socrates had a very demanding concept of knowledge. Many of our everyday knowledge claims wouldn't pass for knowledge because what he wanted then is from his partners, of his interlocutors, was to give an exact explanation and on further questioning to justify the explanation and so on. It was really a very high concept of knowledge he had. And Socrates profession of ignorance does not concern trivial things such as where he lives and how old he is. As it says in the apology, he is concerned with things fine and good, i.e. things of the greatest importance. And what he's concerned with are the fundamental values of life. He had his particular victims picked out and he questioned the politicians, the poets and also certain craftsmen's claim to knowledge. And that is what Socrates claims to be ignorant about, namely concerning claims that are important for our understanding of our lives. And that, he claimed, he didn't know. He had no firm knowledge about. In addition, he claimed he had never taught anybody anything about that kind of thing.

ES: So Socrates just wanted to know more about all kinds of things. He was just very curious, one could say?

DF: Yeah, very curious, but not, as I said, about facts, if we say, of everyday life or people's opinions about this or that, but really about the values which determine the way in which we live our life. That was his main focus.

ES: And does this set him apart from other previous philosophers? This thinking about life and how to live life and what it means?

DF: Yes, indeed that sets him apart because the so-called 'pre-Socratics', which means everybody before Socrates, were basically concerned with what we would call 'philosophy of nature'. And Socrates turned all that around and focused on what we nowadays call ethics and asked people who claimed to know all about it – ethics also means politics – for an account of

what they were talking about. And that is what was in the center of the Socratic questioning. And one has to say, in Greece, in the fifth century, when Socrates lived after the successfully ended wars against the Persians, there was a general uprise all over Greece, but in Athens, most of all, economic but also educational and scientific. All of a sudden people started to study what we would call 'baby physics', but also mathematics and so on. And the educated upper class took part in that. And so there was all of a sudden indeed a more demanding conception of knowledge.

ES: So this was a time of a rethinking or a general shift of looking at the world, but also education and so forth?

DF: Right. And the upper class, which in Greece it was easy to say who was poor and who was rich. The rich didn't have to work for a living and the poor did. And the rich upper class spent their days with sports, but also with culture. And culture reached a much higher level. The 50 years after the Persian wars were the so-called 50 golden years of the classical age, the great poets, the great musicians, the architects, but of course also the philosophers and the general level of education had risen. It wasn't enough that you could read and write and do basic calculation, you had to also be educated in a general way. And that's what the upper class really did. And that is what those famous people, the sophists taught. They were migrating teachers, migrating from city to city and taught, some for a lot of money, so to speak, the '*jeunesse dorée*' in the city. And they learned from them, argumentation, among other things, rhetoric in general, but also culture in general. Some of them taught astronomy, mathematics. So, it was a general educational upsurge, and that is what got Socrates wondering what the worth of that kind of teaching really was.

ES: But was Socrates himself an aristocrat or was he a rich man or was he a sophist? How can we grasp Socrates?

DF: Well, Socrates it seems, was not a rich man. It's not clear whether he was from the upper level of Athenians because at one point he said that his mother had been a midwife, and that wouldn't be the aristocrats' business. Women of the upper class never left their house. He was

poor, that's what we do know. But evidently, he was very well educated himself. And at that time, Socrates engaged in the youth with discussion. Most people thought he was just the Athenian sophist because they couldn't see any difference between his kind of interrogations and the kind of discussion that the sophists taught, because rhetoric had two parts. One was giving speeches, which people had to do in politics, and the second one being a very good discussant in private too. And the upper class really wanted to shine because Athens was a small city state, and all the male members of the upper class wanted to be active in politics. And so, if you wanted to be somebody, you had to be a good discussant, and that's why they flocked to the sophists. And that's why also lots flocked to Socrates.

ES: But could you then also explain a bit more what sets Socrates apart? How was he different from the other sophists in that case?

DF: Well, for many Athenians, especially those who didn't trust him and thought he was a subversive element, they couldn't see any difference. But Socrates was not just concerned with passing on clever techniques of argument but getting to the point of the positions. And that's of course, if you just listen to the surface, you perhaps can't see any difference. But clearly Plato and certain other young men could see a difference, therefore followed Socrates. But of course, his questioning, which often ended in the refutation of what his poor questionee had proposed, looked to many as if it's just sophistry because he pointed out to them that what they had started out with quite some self-confidence, was ill-founded, and they ended in impasse in aporia, checkmated by Socrates.

ES: So, it is understandable why some people didn't like him. Nobody wants to hear that, the smart thoughts that one has, that they're actually not that smart at all. I understand why probably he hurt some egos. But then I also wonder, you mentioned before that his mother might have been a midwife, and I know there's also this metaphor about the midwife. What did Socrates mean with this, and how did he help or annoy his interlocutors?

DF: Well, the midwife business comes late in one of Plato's dialogues. It's only in the Theaetetus that Socrates says that he's a midwife, who helps his partners bring to life his thoughts and then

checks whether they're livable, if they will survive scrutiny. In his earlier dialogues, he has different comparisons for himself. In 'The Apology', he says that the Oracle at Delphi had sent him on his mission to stir up like a gadfly, the Athenians, like a noble but sluggish horse. And so the gadfly is of course one of the metaphors for Socrates stinging people. The other one is in *Meno* where his victim is a disciple of the sophists. And when Socrates had pointed out to him that his attempt to define virtue was incoherent, then he says: "Socrates, I have heard that you are kind of a stingray, and you even look that way." Socrates was sort of proverbially ugly. "So you are stinging people and numbing them." And Socrates: "Well, I numbed myself," but otherwise he accepted that comparison.

And of course, a gadfly and a stingray doesn't go well with a midwife. You wouldn't want to have your child brought to birth by a gadfly or a stingray. So, it is the more gentle way. And Socrates, in *Theaetetus*, is very gentle with this young man, plus all his suggestions, which he brings out. But his knowledge, Socrates amplifies on. He refutes them all in the end but it's kind of a productive refutation. It's not just this slap dash: now you're gone and now you don't know any longer what you said before. And the dialogue is written when Plato was about 60. So, it is the later Plato who speaks there and presents Socrates in a different way. And one has to say, no two Socrates in Plato's dialogues are alike. There is not a schema that Plato has and that he runs through different topics, but they're all different. The people are different, and Socrates treats them differently. He's always very friendly to young men. He is more exacting and less compliant with, especially, all those who claim to know. So, starting out with a knowledge claim gets you into trouble with Socrates.

ES: Do you think that maybe in the beginning, Plato was also a bit annoyed by Socrates, and then when he got older and Socrates had died – we'll also talk about that a bit more later – that he came to appreciate the ways that Socrates worked in the sense that in the beginning it was a very negative image and later on, midwife is a noble job, at least that's what we think today, I don't know how the Athenians saw this. But do you think there was a shift in his attitude as well?

DF: It seems that Plato joined Socrates already at a rather early age. It's said, we don't know whether it's true, but it's said that as a young man, he wrote tragedies and then he heard Socrates and burnt his tragedies and joined Socrates. We don't know when he started to write dialogues, but it seems he didn't start before Socrates' death, so Socrates was gone. His early dialogues are just short. And usually with somebody whom Socrates brings down, as one might say, reduces to aporia, where he is to say: "I don't know what I was talking about before." But evidently Plato thought this was important, this admission of ignorance. And that's why he lets Socrates say, "I know that I don't know all these great things, but at least I'm better off because I don't think I know, because it's worse to think you know." And it seems that that was something that convinced Plato.

ES: But now I wonder, again, it's annoying if someone points out your flaws. I understand that, but it's not that annoying that you would have to sentence someone to death. And Socrates is known to have been forced to drink the poison hemlock. Why did that happen? How did that happen and what were the reactions to this? Because it does seem rather extreme.

DF: Well, the situation in Athens has to be taken into consideration. It was at the end of this long 30-year war between Athens and Sparta, which in the end, the Athenians lost in a disastrous way. And of course, if you think of 30 years of war, it didn't go on constantly. It was and off and on war, but it continued all the time. There was a lot of blood lit, and of course, Athens in the end had to capitulate to the Spartans, take down their walls. Many people had been impoverished as it is in such things. So that was the first thing. The second thing was after the war, the Spartans had set in a commission to draw up a new constitution at Athens, a non-democratic one, because they thought the Athenians were also ready to go to war because of democracy.

And this commission then ended up establishing themselves as tyrants. These were all Athenians, and they had a brief but very bloodthirsty rule over Athens. These were the so-called 'Thirty Tyrants'. And many members of the Athenian upper class were part of it, two of them, Plato's uncle and cousin, Critias and Charmides. And when they were deposed, which was in another brief war, the Spartans accepted that the Athenians could restore the

democracy, but under the condition that no revenge was taken for the leftover members of the Thirty Tyrants. So there was a bad atmosphere in Athens. And of course, after such a crisis, which ends in the bloody tyranny, people wonder how did people get there to that point? "What happened to us Athenians, that we all of a sudden have people who do these kind of things?" And many of those who had been in, first of all before in the war, there had been attempted coups, and then after the war there was Thirty Tyrants and many of those had been at one point, disciples of Socrates or followers of Socrates.

And so, there was this idea, "How did we get to this downfall, to this moral downfall?", which was also a cultural and of course, economical downfall. "How did this happen?", and many fingers pointed to Socrates. They said: "Well, it's these kinds of subversive people who undermined the traditional values in Athens that used to work so well. And that is what happened." And so, Socrates was the intellectual who had undermined the values in Athens.

ES: So was he just basically a scapegoat in that case?

DF: One can say that, yeah, but it seems why they took him to court and indicted him for atheism, that was the one point, introducing new deities, allegedly, which seems to have been more or less of a cop out. And the second point was ruining the young ones, spoiling the youth. And that seems to have been the sore point. They thought: "This kind of questioning is just subversive. The young ones lose respect for the ancient values." And since, among his victims, Socrates' older victims, in these discussions, there had been, as he says in his speech in court himself, there had been the politicians, there had been the poets, and there had been the best of the craftsmen. And if they are questioned in public and can't defend their views, they lose face because everything was public. People would giggle and snigger and Socrates even mentions in his defense speech, the sons of the very rich stood around and later on imitated him. And so, they had the feeling there was this whole movement of Socratic questioning, which was in part responsible for the Athenian downfall.

ES: But did Socrates try to defend himself or did he seek this noble death or something? I don't know if that's a bit extreme, but Socrates seems like a fascinating figure. So maybe.

DF: Well, in a way, of course, he tried to defend himself, and he starts out with saying that his main accusers are not those who have taken him to court, but the old ones. Like the comic poet, Aristophanes, who years earlier had made a figure of Plato in comedy, where he's portrayed as a strange sophist, and it's called *The Clouds*, because allegedly Socrates was praising the clouds as the gods who were doing, of course, and saying cloudy things. In addition, taught rhetoric and making the worse speech the better one. And he said: "These are the dangerous old accusers who portrayed me that way." Neither the accusers nor Socrates could refer to the recent political affairs, that was ruled out by the Spartans. So that couldn't be really addressed. There is a subtext to the whole defense of things that were not mentioned. But for the rest, he was very provocative too, in his defense speech. And that's why as he says himself, in the end: "More people voted for the death penalty than initially had voted for guilty." So they felt: "There he goes again. This is the old Socrates. He won't be any different if we let him go."

ES: And as far as I know, also, he would've actually gotten the chance to flee. Why did he not flee? Was he unhappy with the situation, thought: "Okay, I want a way out," or did he want to go down in history?

DF: Well, he could have done two things: First, in essence, if you were indicted, you were not taken to prison – he could have just left Athens like other people had left. That would've been open to him. He didn't want to do that. Then after he had been convicted to death, he could have fled, but only as he says himself, his friends would have to bribe the warden in prison and smuggle him out in women's garbs. So, it would've been really escaping by hook or by crook, and he felt he would've just admitted guilt, where he didn't want to admit guilt. Plus, you are right, he wanted to take a stand. He wanted to say: "If I have to die for this, I have to die for this. But what I did, I did in good conscience and for the Athenians' benefit", because he thought he was benefiting the Athenians and going elsewhere, if you go elsewhere in Greece, you were not a citizen, so you wouldn't have that kind of position where you could go on. And Socrates, in Plato at least, felt as long as he was alive, that was his mission. He wanted to show to people where they didn't know what they were talking about and that it was about

important things. And so yes, one may say, it is a bit like Lutheran stance, but Luther in the Imperial diet involves where he says: "Here I stand. I can't do no other, so help me God." It was a little bit like that. He wanted to make a public statement that he still found his mission important and that he wasn't going to give it up by just running away.

ES: And we know that in the long term, he actually did make a stand that we still talk about today. So he was, in a sense, very successful with this wild idea that he could do that. But in the immediate aftermath in Athens, did he have this power? When he died, did people reflect on why he died and that he was actually an important figure showing them things that they should think about more?

DF: Unfortunately, we don't know much about the 4th century at that time. It seems that the Athenians were not proud of what they had done. The death penalty was something which was frequently used and then sometimes afterwards they were sorry that they did it. But the very fact that the so-called Socratics, his adherents, Plato was just one of them, started to write Socratic dialogues, and some of them had done it even earlier before his death. That shows that of course, people thought there is the Socratic mission, and certainly Plato was concerned with it, and one might say the general public in Athens, at least the fact that Plato was never in any difficulty, though he continued to churn out dialogue after dialogue, and his own school taught the Socratic philosophy. We don't know of any enmity against Plato that may have been the indirect regret what they had done to Socrates.

ES: We talked a lot about Plato and how Plato passed on the legacy of Socrates. Were there other figures that also talked about Socrates in the sense that, how can we know it is not actually Plato telling us fun stories?

DF: Of course, Plato is the towering figure, because he's – apart from Xenophon, about whom I'm talking in a moment – his Socratic writings are the only ones we have in total. We have them all. There were lots of others, the so-called Socratics, who also wrote Socratic dialogues. Unfortunately, with the exception of a few quotations – that's what we mean by fragments, it's quotations in later authors – we don't know what their dialogues were like. So, Plato is just the

all-present figure. And Xenophon, who was the same age as Plato, was the historian, and his writings on Socrates, it's memories of Socrates – they're extensive – but one has to say, most of the time, Xenophon is like a good uncle, who gives you moral advice, as Socrates gives you moral advice. And if you read Xenophon, you can't understand why in the world the Athenians convicted him to death. He's just not a provocative figure. And Socrates must have been provocative. Now, in Plato, no two Socrates are alike, in all dialogues he's somewhat different. But altogether you get a coherent picture, especially in so-called early dialogues, where Plato must have been a young man.

ES: Now, this podcast is called Wisdom Talks, and you mentioned that Xenophon portrayed Socrates as a wise or happy uncle or whatever. So, what were the wisdomous things that he passed on?

DF: Well, he advises you on how you would behave and how you wouldn't put ambition and wealth before being a good man, but it's in this kind of avuncular, non-provocative way. He's not reducing people to speechlessness, who get then very angry, because other people are snickering. It's a moralizing advisory talk. Jonathan Barnes, I think once wrote and said about Xenophon, he baked a dry pie, but there are some plums in it. So, once in a while you realize that Xenophon was not a dunce, but he was not a philosophically very smart man.

ES: We saw a philosopher's view of Socrates, we saw a historian's view of Socrates. But what about the before? We talked also a lot about the after, and maybe we can also talk a bit more later about how we today stand to Socrates. But what was the before that one suddenly started to call the 'pre-Socratics'?

DF: Well, the name of course is from early modern age, but the followers of Socrates were called Socratics already in antiquity. There was this, then there was Socrates, and people realized, and already Aristotle realized that the so-called pre-Socratics, namely all the people before Socrates, were not doing philosophy in the same way. Who were they? Well, of course, they're also different kinds of people, but most of them did what we might call 'philosophy of nature'. They were concerned with the universe, what keeps the stars going, what is the earth

made of, what does the earth rely on, why does it stay seemingly still? And then things like water coming out from rocks. So, is it all on water? They had these speculative questions. Some of them were of course more sophisticated and others were simpler, but it was a broad range of questions they dealt with, and they all had something to do with nature.

And as Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* at one point says: "That's what they all did". And Socrates changed that in the sense that he shifted the focus of attention to ethics. And by and large, we of course, have none of the writings of the pre-Socratics. We also have just quotations, some longer and some shorter. But yes, by and large, they were really focusing on physics, what we might call physical questions, astronomy, the philosophy of nature and not ethics. Now, some of them, of course, also spoke about how human beings were supposed to live, but it is much more in the sense of wisdom philosophy, wisdom thought than precise discussions in the way in which Socrates forced his contemporaries to engage in.

ES: So, you also see this clear break and that it's a useful term to talk about the pre-Socrates people?

DF: Yes. And I think that's why in history of the modern age, the term just caught on. The only person who didn't adopt it was Hegel. He, in his history of Greek philosophy, put Socrates together with the sophists and the early thinkers and had made a break with Plato and Aristotle, but the others all accepted that distinction.

ES: But can Socrates be put in a box with the sophists? As you described in the very beginning, it seems that also maybe he himself clearly did not want to be just a classic sophist?

DF: Yeah, of course he didn't think he was. He often stresses that he didn't. First of all, he didn't teach people. Secondly, he didn't take any money. He discussed things with people. It was just because, the better sophists were fairly shrewd men who had a sophisticated way of analyzing what people were talking about, that for people who didn't listen carefully, it was difficult to distinguish between Socrates and the sophists, because they thought they're all doing hair-splitting, logic chopping things. And so, for them it was difficult to separate them. And one of,

evidently, Plato's early concerns was to show what difference there is. And that's why he wrote these Socratic dialogues.

ES: And now to build the bridge to now, because as I also said in the beginning, we all know this sentence: "I know that I don't know" or "I know that I know nothing." How do you think Socrates is perceived today? And do you think it's important that we talk about him also at school? He's one of the philosophers that we talk about when we have first philosophic education. How do you think this happened, and do you think it's good to talk about him in that sense?

DF: Well, first of all, at least in Plato's version of the early Socrates, it's not so hard to understand what's going on. Reading *The Apology* is interesting, and it catches on and so on. The idea that you should not just take over, but you've been taught by right and left when you're a child and growing up, but should critically question what you're being taught. That seems to be the Socratic element, and therefore people, still nowadays, admire Socrates. And I think that is a perennial concern. We do have to ask: "What are we concerned with? Why do we value this? Why is this very necessary? Why is this supposed to be valuable?" And these kind of why questions, especially if you don't just raise them and look clever, but pursue them yourself too, that is considered a valuable thing.

ES: For our listeners who are interested in learning more about Socrates and what he thought – we don't have his direct words of course, but via Plato – what kind of analyses or textbooks or so forth would you recommend, to learn more about this figure?

DF: Well, I think Plato, in a way, you can't get around him. And the early dialogues, especially *The Apology*, his defense speech in court, is a must. Of other things, the problem with secondary literature is always that they go into lots of questions that you do have to raise, maybe how do we know, who are those people who make those claims about Socrates and so on. So it gets fairly technical very soon, and you have the feeling you've been overwhelmed with a lot of scholarly information you don't know what to do with. On the other hand, often it's interesting, at least, to look at various articles. For instance, *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, and some of the articles are more readable than others, which are more demanding.

And there is just one really very short book by C.C.W Taylor: *Socrates: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press has these. They are very short books on Plato and Aristotle and also one on Socrates. And I've looked at it very briefly and it's really legible.

ES: This is wonderful. Now, as I saw that time progresses far too quickly every time we have these talks, I would still like to ask you, is there something else you think we should really know about Socrates, something that we might have missed in this talk that is important to take home now as a think-about in the future?

DF: Well, Socrates is always connected with irony. And I want to say a word about irony. What we mean by irony, is that I say the opposite of what I mean, presupposing the other knows that. So, if I say to you: "This was a very smart remark", if this is meant ironically, I'm telling you, this was an idiotic thing to say. Now, ancient irony in Socrates' time didn't have that meaning. Socrates, one has to say, first he was a humorous person, he is sometimes sarcastic, but he sometimes pretends, he's pretentious, because he wants to draw on out and on his interlocutors.

So, at the beginning of this very short dialogue, the *Euthyphro*, where they're talking about the holy, Socrates, says to Euthyphro: "I want to learn from you", because Euthyphro is the self-proclaimed expert in things godly, all this law about the gods, "I want to learn from you, because maybe I can defend myself better in court." Because he's on the way to court, and Euthyphro takes this all as a matter of course. But it's clear, Socrates, first of all, doesn't think that Euthyphro is such an expert. And secondly, he's on the way to his indictment. He doesn't believe that in court he can say, "I've been taught by Euthyphro what the holy is. Now you have to let me go." This is of course, it's pretense, and the reader is supposed to, of course, to see through it, but Euthyphro doesn't. So he goes on and on and is very full of himself. Socrates sometimes draws people out, and of those who later on then realize they have been drawn on and made fun of in a way, they of course, also got angry.

ES: That surely didn't help in the court appeal later on, that he made fun of Euthyphro, as you said. So that maybe wasn't that smart of him after all. Although I do very much enjoy this anecdote.

DF: And he did it with other people as well. And many of them realized only afterwards. Now Euthyphro and Socrates are alone. There are no witnesses. But with many of the discussions also in Plato, there is all of Athens there and then if the people felt like they've been exposed, in a way, got very angry. So, there was this very mixed reaction to Socrates. And if you read Plato's dialogues, you sometimes have mixed feelings too. And I remember that Gregory Vlastos, the great American scholar who was the expert on Plato, with respect to the dialogue *Protagoras*, wrote in the preface: "Socrates plays a less than admirable role in this dialogue." The most famous sophist, who was firstly an honorable and honest man, and also a smart man, he treats them in not an all too admirable way. So, in some platonic dialogues, you think that's provocative and needlessly also, as one might say, fresh.

ES: Thank you very much Dorothea for showing us all of these different levels of knowledge that Socrates passed on, and also the different levels of wisdom that we can gain from him, and that we should maybe critically also analyze him, but also enjoy his wit as well in that case. Thank you very much for being here and telling us all these things.

DF: You're welcome.

ES: At this point, I would also like to invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom Talks. I am very happy that you are listening to this Socrates talk today and I would also like to invite you to curiously plunge into the multitude of texts and further podcasts that can be found on our website, metis.ethz.ch, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature, and wisdom practices. You can also find more information in the show notes. Thank you for listening and goodbye.

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