

# Why Deep Thinkers Are Often Societal Outcasts

Since the beginning of Western societies, Socrates has been the prototypical intellectual inquisitor. Perhaps the "[historical Socrates](#)" has been difficult to pin down, but two things remain consistent among various accounts of this ancient thinker: 1) his claim to possess no true knowledge, and 2) his relentless examination of the knowledge claims of others.

For example, when engaging Gorgias, a teacher of rhetoric, Socrates says:

"If you're the same kind of person I am, I'd be glad to continue questioning you; otherwise, let's forget it. What kind of person am I? I'm happy to have a mistaken idea proved wrong, and I'm happy to prove someone else's mistaken ideas wrong, I'm certainly not less happy if I'm proven wrong than if I've proved someone else wrong, because, as I see it, I've got the best of it: there's nothing worse than the state which I've been saved from, so that's better for me than saving someone else. You, see there's nothing worse for a person, in my opinion, than holding mistaken views about the matters we're discussing at the moment" (*Gorgias* 458a).

If you're like me and consider yourself an intellectual, reading quotes like these make you feel *good*. Socrates' thoughts have a timelessness, an eternality to them that is refreshing. He speaks of a kind of intellectualism that is not an [adversarial fight-to-the-death](#), but rather a mutual challenging in which everyone benefits in the conversation. Socrates is so sincere, he even expresses that he would actually *prefer* to be proven wrong, so that he personally

would receive the reward of being saved from error!

If Socrates' own philosophical criticism were aimed at any of us, I dare say we would all bristle at his questioning. We all desire that kind of openness and intellectual tolerance exhibited by Socrates, but it's not that easy or common. In his dialogues many of Socrates' fellow debaters grew annoyed and angry at him. How can we assume we would be any less unreasonable? For the "crime" of having and spreading unorthodox ideas, our society likely wouldn't have a man like Socrates killed. But how could we think we would commend someone like him in our times?

To truly love Socrates and all that he represents, an individual must possess the virtue of *intellectual humility*. One must demonstrate – both in word and deed – that her love for the truth is greater than her need to be right. Further, societies manifest this virtue corporately by fostering a healthy, open-minded intellectual culture, one that permits its people to question commonly accepted ideas without fear of immediate ostracism.

However, in our modern "cultured" society we [fire people for questioning the orthodoxy](#), [throw out thinkers who challenge the norm](#), and [bully those who call us bullies](#). These are our leading companies, educational institutions, and artistic industries putting down and pushing out anyone who critiques the conventional paradigm. With our words we praise Socrates, but with our actions we are killing him all over again.

Now is our modern culture uniquely guilty of rejecting men like Socrates? Of course not. Looking broadly at history, it's difficult to name any society that so embodied intellectual humility that it would have collectively received Socrates with gladness. (Perhaps, our need for self-preservation prevents it.)

Socrates was a skeptic, but not radically so. He argued that

truth was hard to grasp, but he believed it existed and was worth fighting for:

“There’s one proposition that I’d defend to the death, if I could, by argument and by action: that as long as we think we should search for what we don’t know we’ll be better people—less fainthearted and less lazy—than if we were to think that we had no chance of discovering what we don’t know and that there’s no point in even searching for it” (*Meno* 86b-c).

Unfortunately for Socrates, the very method of intellectual cross-examination that made him famous brought him to his demise. While Socrates offered his intellectual inquiry only to those willing and up to the challenge, for others this was not enough; they had to take him out. And while we may not employ hemlocks to remove our opponents from the forum, our social tactics seem to suffice for the purpose.

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