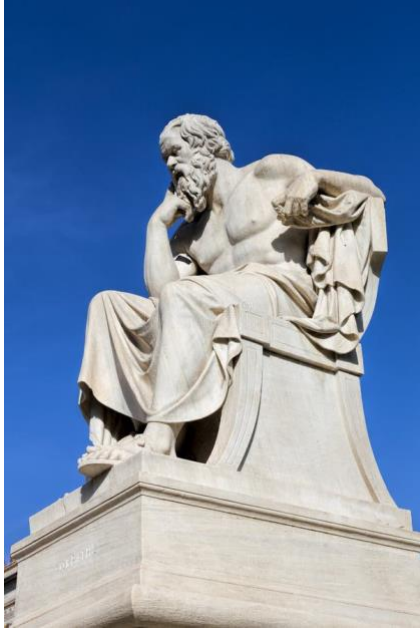


The Socratic Foundation of *criticalthinkingmentor.com*



These programmes are rooted in the tradition of **Socratic enquiry**. **Socrates** (c. 470–399 BC), the Athenian philosopher, left no writings of his own. What we know of his method comes mainly from the dialogues of his student **Plato**, and to a lesser degree from accounts by Xenophon and Aristophanes. Socrates spent his life in the public spaces of Athens, famously engaging citizens in rigorous dialogue.

His method was remarkably but deceptively simple: ask questions, then more questions, then more questions. In this way he exposed contradictions in the methodology and structure of his interlocutors' beliefs. **This forced them to examine their assumptions, and in many cases led them toward clearer thinking — or, at least, to be able to recognise how much they did not know.**

Socrates famously insisted that **the unexamined life is not worth living**. He was highly suspicious of received opinion, of claims to authority (a bias persistent in our time!), and of a complacent certainty masquerading as wisdom. For this, he was tried and executed by the Athenian democracy in 399 BC — **an ironic and tragic consequence of poor critical thinking** and persecution of those who challenge orthodoxy.

His influence is beyond measure. Plato, his greatest student, **developed the Socratic approach into a comprehensive philosophical system** and founded the Academy in Athens — probably the first university in the Western world. **Aristotle**, Plato's student in turn, was **effectively the founder of formal logic and empirical enquiry** — and the author of *Rhetoric*, the first systematic work on the art of persuasion.

Through these two intellectual descendants alone, Socrates' insistence on rigorous questioning shaped the entire direction of Western thought, from medieval scholasticism to the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the modern tradition of critical inquiry — **which seems to be under severe threat from a number of directions.**

Socrates was, profoundly, a champion of **cognitive sovereignty** — the right and **duty of every individual to think for themselves**, regardless of the pressures of convention, authority, or the crowd. I would assert that in a world now flooded with AI-generated content and algorithmic persuasion, his example is more relevant than ever.

Stephen Rathbone

Critical Thinking Mentor (criticalthinkingmentor.com), April 2026