

**"ONE SHOULD NEVER DO WRONG IN RETURN, NOR MISTREAT ANY MAN,
NO MATTER HOW ONE HAS BEEN MISTREATED BY HIM."**

— SOCRATES (C. 469–399 BCE)

ETHICISM — An Overview

Inception: Socrates (469-399)

Adherents: [EBI Estimate]

Primary Value Proposition: If one knows the good, one will always do the good.

The Word of (about and/or attributed to) God:

- Some Religionists, as well as some secular ethicists, believe that morality cannot really exist without God or gods to provide ontological grounding.

Core Beliefs: Socrates's most famous philosophical ideas include the necessity of doing what one thinks is right even in the face of universal opposition, and the need to pursue knowledge even when opposed. Socrates' method of philosophical inquiry consisted in questioning people on the positions they asserted and then working them through questions into a contradiction, thus proving to them that their original assertion was wrong. Socrates himself never takes a position; in *The Apology* he radically and skeptically claims to know nothing at all except that he knows nothing.

Socrates and Plato refer to this method of questioning as *elenchus*, which means something like "cross-examination." The Socratic *elenchus* eventually gave rise to dialectic, the idea that truth needs to be pursued by modifying one's position through questioning and conflict with opposing ideas. It is this idea of the truth being pursued, rather than discovered, that characterizes Socratic thought and much of our world view today. The Western notion of dialectic is somewhat Socratic in nature in that it is conceived of as an ongoing process. Although Socrates in *The Apology* claims to have discovered no other truth than that he knows no truth, the Socrates of Plato's other earlier dialogues is of the opinion that truth is somehow attainable through this process of *elenchus*.

Socrates was very similar in thought to the Sophists. He was unconcerned with physical or metaphysical questions; the issue of primary importance was ethics, living a good life. He appeared to be a sophist because he seems to tear down every ethical position he's confronted with; he never offers alternatives after he's torn down other people's ideas.

The one positive statement that Socrates seems to have made is a definition of virtue: "virtue is knowledge." If one knows the good, one will always do the good. It follows, then, that anyone who does anything wrong doesn't really know what the good is. This, for Socrates, justifies tearing down people's moral positions, for if they have the wrong ideas about virtue, morality, love, or any other ethical idea, they can't be trusted to do the right thing.