

Who Said That Socrates

Character Dossier and Full Production Script

VICARII PRODUCTIONS

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” **SUBSTANTIALLY AUTHENTICATED**

CASE FILE WST SOCRATES 001

Purpose

This production investigates the words attached to Socrates, the Athenian who wrote nothing yet became one of history’s most quoted men. It separates sayings rooted in Plato’s early dialogues from later paraphrases and modern inventions, then asks the more important question: what did Socrates prove when his own life was put on trial?

Production verdict

We cannot recover a verbatim transcript of the historical Socrates. We can, however, distinguish words placed in his mouth by near-contemporary sources from quotations that appear centuries—or millennia—too late. The strongest surviving evidence reveals a man who tested wisdom, refused profitable certainty, resisted injustice under two regimes, and accepted death rather than abandon the examined life.

The Man Who Left No Words

Athens, 399 BCE. An old man stands before a citizen jury. He is about seventy, famously unbeautiful, plainly dressed and irritatingly calm. He has served as a soldier, endured cold and hunger, raised a family, lived in poverty and spent decades stopping people in public places to ask what they meant by courage, justice, goodness and wisdom.

His name is Socrates. He has published nothing. He runs no school and takes no fees. Yet the city accuses him of corrupting the young and failing to respect its gods. He is not merely defending a collection of opinions. He is defending the right—and the duty—to question a life before living it blindly.

That makes Socrates a perfect “Who Said That?” subject and an unusually difficult one. Every word comes through somebody else. Plato made him the central speaker in philosophical dialogues. Xenophon remembered a practical moral adviser. Aristophanes had already turned him into a comic stage intellectual suspended in a basket. These portraits overlap, quarrel and exaggerate. This is the Socratic problem: the historical man stands behind several masks, and none can simply be lifted away.

The Private Man Beneath the Statue

The polished marble philosopher came later. Contemporary descriptions give us a stocky, strong man with bulging eyes, a flat upturned nose and heavy lips, more satyr than statesman. He went barefoot, wore the same rough cloak by day and night, and could outlast other men in cold, fatigue and wine. Alcibiades compared him to a carved Silenus figure: comic and ugly outside, but containing something unexpectedly precious.

He was also a veteran. At Potidaea, Delium and Amphipolis he stood in danger as an Athenian hoplite. Plato's Socrates uses that experience at his trial: a soldier must not desert the post assigned to him merely because death has arrived. His philosophical mission, he says, is another such post.

This matters because it rescues him from becoming a floating head made of quotations. His courage was physical before it became ceremonial. Under the democracy he opposed an unlawful mass trial. Under the oligarchic Thirty, he refused an order to help arrest Leon of Salamis for execution and simply went home, knowing the refusal might kill him. His argument was not that consequences do not matter. It was that doing wrong damages the part of us that matters more.

The Olive Grove Test

We may picture Socrates questioning companions beneath Attic olives, but he was more commonly found in Athens itself—in the agora, workshops, gymnasias and streets. The olive grove belongs to the atmosphere of his world, not to one documented headquarters. That distinction is useful: a good image can evoke ancient Athens without pretending that invention is evidence.

His method was deceptively simple. Ask for a definition. Test it against examples. Expose contradiction. Begin again. The victim often discovered that confidence had been mistaken for knowledge. Socrates called himself a gadfly sent to sting a large, noble but sluggish horse: Athens.

The Sayings Audit

One The Unexamined Life

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” SUBSTANTIALLY AUTHENTICATED

Source: Plato, Apology 38a. The exact English wording varies by translator, but the thought and setting are secure. After conviction, Socrates considers whether he might save himself by remaining silent. He refuses. Daily discussion of virtue and the examination of himself and others, he says, is the greatest human good. This is not a slogan for endless self-absorption. It is his answer to a death sentence.

Two Knowing That He Does Not Know

“I know that I know nothing.” FAMOUS PARAPHRASE

Socrates does not say this neat sentence in Plato. The closest passage is Apology 21d: after questioning a reputedly wise politician, he concludes that the other man knows nothing but thinks he knows, while Socrates “neither knows nor thinks that he knows.” The popular version compresses a genuine idea, but turns careful intellectual modesty into an absolute claim Socrates never makes. He does claim to know, for example, that wrongdoing is shameful.

Three Life Is Not the Highest Value

“Not life, but a good life, is to be chiefly valued.” AUTHENTICATED IN PLATO

Source: Plato, Crito 48b, in a traditional English translation. Crito urges Socrates to escape from prison. Socrates answers that survival is not the deciding principle. A good life is a just and honourable life; escape must therefore be judged by whether it is right, not merely by whether it keeps him alive. Translation alters the surface, but not the argument.

Four The Good Man and Death

“No evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death.” AUTHENTICATED IN PLATO

Source: Plato, Apology 41d. These are among the last words of the courtroom speech. Socrates is not promising comfort or immunity from pain: he has just been condemned. His claim is moral. Other people may injure the body, reputation or circumstances of a decent person, but they cannot force that person to become unjust.

Five The Final Parting

“The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows.” AUTHENTICATED IN PLATO

Source: the close of Plato's Apology, 42a. It is exquisitely shaped literature, not a stenographic record. Even so, it gives the ancient tradition's clearest final portrait: neither boastful certainty nor panic, but a last admission that death remains unknown.

Imposters and Doubtful Customers

Claim	Verdict	Finding
"Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."	IMPOSTER	No ancient source. A close form—"Be pitiful, for every man is fighting a hard battle"—was printed under the name of Scottish author Ian Maclaren in 1897.
"The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new."	IMPOSTER	A modern line associated with Dan Millman's fictional Socrates in <i>Way of the Peaceful Warrior</i> . The speaker called Socrates is a twentieth-century literary character, not the Athenian philosopher.
"Strong minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, weak minds discuss people."	IMPOSTER	No trace in Plato, Xenophon or other ancient witnesses. Modern variants circulate under several names, especially Eleanor Roosevelt. The attribution supplies ancient prestige, not evidence.
"By all means, marry. If you get a good wife, you will be happy; if a bad one, you will become a philosopher."	DOUBTFUL	An entertaining story without a dependable early citation. Ancient anecdotes often caricature Xanthippe and turn Socrates' marriage into a joke. It may suit the legend; that does not make it his sentence.
"Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel."	WRONG MAN	The underlying comparison belongs to Plutarch, who wrote that the mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled. It is often reassigned to Socrates—and sometimes to Yeats.
"There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance."	DOUBTFUL PARAPHRASE	It resembles Socratic intellectualism, but the tidy modern wording is not a securely located statement by Socrates in Plato. Treat it as a summary, never as a transcript.

What Survives the Filter

Socrates did not leave us a quotation book. What survives is more interesting: a pattern of conduct. He questioned reputation, admitted the limits of knowledge, refused to purchase safety with injustice, and faced the unknown without pretending to know it. The marble bust is famous. The barefoot veteran who irritated a city into thinking is worth meeting.

Narration Script

ElevenLabs voice Grant. Read with intelligent warmth and dry amusement. Do not play Socrates as an oracle. He is alert, human, teasing and increasingly grave. Approximate running time: 8 to 10 minutes.

OPEN

Socrates may be the most quoted man who never wrote a word. That is our first difficulty. Our second is that the internet has been writing for him ever since.

THE QUESTION

What did Socrates actually say? And when a handsome modern sentence arrives wearing a false beard and sandals, can we catch it before it enters the history books?

THE MAN

Athens. Three hundred and ninety-nine years before the common era. An old man stands before a jury of his fellow citizens. He is about seventy. He is poor, plainly dressed, famously ugly—and in very serious trouble. Socrates is accused of corrupting the young and failing to honour the gods of the city. He has no book to defend. He wrote none. He has no school accounts to produce. He took no fees. What he does have is a lifetime of questions—and a city thoroughly tired of answering them.

BENEATH THE MARBLE

Forget, for a moment, the polished marble philosopher. The ancient descriptions give us a strong, stocky man with staring eyes, a flat nose and heavy lips. He walked barefoot, wore a rough cloak, endured cold and hunger, and could drink without becoming drunk. He had also been a soldier. At Potidaea, Delium and Amphipolis he stood his ground as an Athenian hoplite. That fact matters. At his trial he compares philosophy to military service. A man must not desert his post merely because death has appeared.

THE METHOD

Socrates usually worked in public: in the marketplace, workshops, gymnasias and streets. Ask a confident person what courage means. Test the answer. Find the contradiction. Begin again. He did not pour wisdom into pupils. He made people discover the holes in what they already believed. Not everyone appreciated the service. Socrates compared himself to a gadfly, stinging the large and sluggish horse of Athens into wakefulness.

SAYING ONE

Our first saying is the famous one. “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Verdict: substantially authenticated. It appears in Plato’s *Apology*. But notice the setting. Socrates has been convicted. He is considering whether silence might save him. His answer is no. Daily examination of virtue, himself and others, is the greatest good. This is not a decorative motto for a university wall. It is the reason he gives for refusing to stop—even under sentence of death.

SAYING TWO

Now for the line everybody knows: “I know that I know nothing.” Verdict: famous paraphrase. Socrates never says that tidy sentence in Plato. The closest passage is more careful. After questioning a man reputed to be wise, Socrates concludes that the man knows nothing but thinks he knows, while Socrates neither knows nor thinks that he knows. The difference is small enough for a fridge magnet and enormous for philosophy. Socrates is not claiming universal ignorance. He is refusing counterfeit certainty.

SAYING THREE

In prison, his old friend Crito offers escape. Socrates answers: “Not life, but a good life, is to be chiefly valued.” Verdict: authenticated in Plato, allowing for translation. Survival is not the highest test. A good life means a just and honourable one. The question is not simply, Can I escape? It is, Would escaping be right?

SAYING FOUR

Back in the courtroom comes the sternest claim: “No evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death.” He has just been condemned, so he plainly does not mean that good people cannot suffer. He means that no enemy can force a decent person to become unjust. They may damage his body, reputation or fortune. The final guardianship of his character remains his own.

THE CUSTOMERS

And now, the doubtful customers. “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” Beautiful. Humane. Not Socrates. A close version appeared under the name of Scottish writer Ian Maclaren in eighteen ninety-seven. “The secret of change is to focus all your energy on building the new.” Also not ancient Socrates. It belongs to a modern book whose fictional teacher is called Socrates. “Strong minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; weak minds discuss people.” No ancient evidence at all. And “By all means, marry. If you get a good wife you will be happy; if a bad one, a philosopher.” A splendid joke, especially if told beyond Mrs Socrates’ hearing, but not supported by a dependable early source.

THE TEST

Socrates had already resisted injustice under opposing governments. Under democracy, he stood against an unlawful mass proceeding. Under the oligarchic Thirty, he refused an order to help arrest Leon of Salamis for execution. The other men obeyed. Socrates went home. He might have been killed for it. His trial was therefore not the first time his principles became dangerous. It was simply the last.

THE END

Plato closes the courtroom speech with Socrates saying: “The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows.” There is the man in one sentence. Courage, uncertainty and a final question. He does not leave us certainty about death. He leaves us responsibility for life.

CLOSE

Verdict: we cannot hear the unrecorded voice of the historical Socrates. We hear Plato, Xenophon and others remembering, interpreting and sometimes reinventing him. But through the noise a consistent figure remains: the barefoot veteran who tested wisdom, refused injustice and would not purchase another day by abandoning the examined life. The imposters gave him better slogans. Socrates gave us the harder task: ask the next question.

Visual Production Brief

Sequence	Image direction
Opening	Black screen, scratched lettering, fragments of conflicting Socrates quotations. Reveal an empty wax tablet: the famous writer who wrote nothing.
Athens	Historically grounded 16:9 agora scene. Ordinary citizens, workshops and public argument. Natural Mediterranean colour; no sepia.
Socrates portrait	Stocky older man, bald or thinning hair, flat nose, prominent eyes, heavy beard, rough cloak and bare feet. Human and alert—not a godlike marble hero.
Soldier	Socrates as a mature Athenian hoplite at Delium. Accurate bronze helmet, round shield, spear and linen or bronze armour. No fantasy costume.
Questioning	Socrates with a small mixed group in a public colonnade or workshop. One confident speaker faltering as listeners react. Avoid the cliché of a formal classroom.
Olive grove	Use as an atmospheric transition only: Attic light, dry earth, low stone wall, silver-green olives. Do not caption it as his documented school.
Trial	Crowded Athenian citizen court. Socrates standing without theatrical pleading. Tension comes from faces and stillness, not Hollywood spectacle.
Imposters	Playful evidence board: false quotations arrive on modern cards, each stamped IMPOSTER, WRONG MAN or DOUBTFUL.
Prison	Quiet predawn cell; Crito offers escape. Socrates seated, listening rather than preaching.
Final	Return to the empty wax tablet, then a modern hand writing a question rather than a quotation.

Website Packaging

Hero line: The most quoted man who never wrote a word.

Deck: Socrates questioned everybody. Twenty-four centuries later, everybody quotes him—often for things he never said. We put the sayings on trial.

Download label: Download the Socrates Character Dossier

Video label: Watch Who Said That Socrates

Closing prompt: Which famous Socrates quotation should face the machine next?

Source Ledger

Plato, Apology

Core trial narrative; wisdom passage 21d; mission and soul 29d–30b; resistance to the Thirty 32c–e; examined life 38a; death and goodness 41d; final parting 42a. <https://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>

Plato, Crito

Prison escape argument and the priority of the good and just life, 48b. <https://classics.mit.edu/Plato/crito.html>

Plato, Phaedo

Literary account of Socrates' last day and death. <https://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedo.html>

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Socrates

The Socratic problem; ancient witnesses; appearance, conduct, military service and historical cautions. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/socrates/>

Quote Investigator

Modern provenance of the “secret of change” line and its connection to Dan Millman’s fictional Socrates. <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/05/28/socrates-energy/>

Ian Maclaren attribution record

The 1897 “hard battle” wording and its later misattributions. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_Maclaren