

# What Is a Philosopher?

By SIMON CRITCHLEY

Socrates tells the story of Thales, who was by some accounts the first philosopher. He was looking so intently at the stars that he fell into a well. Some witty Thracian servant girl is said to have made a joke at Thales' expense — that in his eagerness to know what went on in the sky he was unaware of the things in front of him and at his feet. Socrates adds "The same jest suffices for all those who engage in philosophy."

What is a philosopher, then? The answer is clear: a laughing stock. But as always with Plato, things are not necessarily as they first appear, and Socrates is the greatest of ironists. First, we should recall that Thales believed that water was the universal substance out of which all things were composed. Water was Thales' philosophers' stone, as it were. Therefore, by falling into a well, he inadvertently presses his basic philosophical claim.

But there is a deeper and more troubling layer of irony here that I would like to peel off more slowly.

Socrates introduces the "digression" by making a distinction between the philosopher and the lawyer." The lawyer is compelled to present a case in court and time is of the essence. **By**

**contrast, we might say, the philosopher is the person who has time or who takes time.**

Theodorus, Socrates' interlocutor, introduces the "digression" with the words, "Aren't we at leisure, Socrates?" The latter's response is interesting. He says, "It appears we are." As we know, in philosophy appearances can be deceptive. But the basic contrast here is between the lawyer, who has no time, or for whom time is money, and the philosopher, who takes time. **The freedom of the philosopher consists in either moving freely from topic to topic or simply spending years returning to the same topic out of perplexity, fascination and curiosity.**

Socrates says that those press of business, are undoubtedly successful, wealthy and extraordinarily honey-tongued, but, Socrates adds, "small in their souls". The philosopher, on the contrary, is free by virtue of his otherworldliness, by his capacity to fall into wells and appear silly. The philosopher shows no respect for rank and inherited privilege and is unaware of anyone's high or low birth. It also does not occur to the philosopher to join a political club or a private party. As Socrates concludes, the philosopher's body alone dwells within the city's walls. In thought, they are elsewhere.

Plato's dialogues were written after Socrates' death. Socrates was charged with impiety towards the gods of the city and with corrupting the youth of Athens. A couple of generations later, during the uprisings against Macedonian rule that followed the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E., Alexander's former tutor, Aristotle, escaped Athens saying, "I will not allow the Athenians to sin twice against philosophy." From the ancient Greeks to Giordano Bruno, Spinoza, Hume and right up to Bertrand Russell, philosophy has repeatedly and persistently been identified with blasphemy against the gods, whichever gods they might be. Perhaps the last laugh is with the philosopher. Nurtured in freedom and taking their time, there is something dreadfully uncanny about the philosopher, something either monstrous or god-like or indeed both at once. This is why many sensible people continue to think the Athenians had a point in condemning Socrates to death. I leave it for you to decide. I couldn't possibly judge.

Simon Critchley is chair of philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York, and part-time professor at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. He is the author of several books, including "The Book of Dead Philosophers," and is moderator of this series.