



Reading Plato's *Apology*

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The following lecture notes on Plato's Apology have been prepared specifically for the philosophical novice in mind. These notes provide a section-by-section commentary on The Apology that supplies the background needed to read the work in its historical and philosophical context. Additional sources have been listed at the end of this commentary for those who would like to delve further into the text.

Background Information

Historical Background

The trial of Socrates must be seen against the backdrop of the dramatic changes that were taking place in Athenian society during the last half of the fifth century. After the victory of the Greeks against the Persians at the Battle of Salamis (480), Athens, in particular, went through a cultural renaissance that transformed the city into the envy of the Mediterranean world. Of course, with this great success also came a certain degree of envy from those city-states that had not done quite so well as Athens---particularly Sparta. By 430 the Peloponnesian War had engulfed the entire Greek peninsula, and would continue on and off for another 27 years. Ultimately Sparta would prove victorious over Athens.

In collusion with certain dissatisfied Athenian aristocrats, Sparta set up two dictatorships in Athens in 411 (The Dictatorship of the 400) and 404 (The Dictatorship of the 30). In order to maintain their power in Athens, these aristocrats initiated a reign of terror that suppressed all opposition.

In 403 the citizens of Athens managed to restore democracy to the city. Although it was customary for the losers in a civil war to be massacred, the democratic leaders of Athens showed themselves to be extraordinarily magnanimous towards their enemies by declaring a general amnesty: "Under the amnesty, once the leaders had been tried, no one could be prosecuted for any violations of the law he committed under the dictatorship or before it. The slate was wiped clean to solidify the civic reconciliation. Nor could anyone sue for recovery of property confiscated by the dictators and sold to meet their expenses or to enrich them. Many wealthy middle-class citizens and resident aliens had suffered such expropriations. But under the amnesty they lost the right to sue for recovery." (Stone 153)

Although law prevented anyone from being punished for acts they had done prior to

403, the Athenians, who were perceived to have been supportive of the dictators, were viewed with great suspicion by those who had suffered under their reign. Socrates, in particular, seems to have been disliked by many powerful Athenians for four reasons: (1) he was known for being hostile towards democratic forms of government and had a loyal following among young Athenian men; (2) he was intimately acquainted with some of the most notorious of the oligarchs, particularly Critias, who was responsible for putting many Athenians to death unjustly; (3) he remained in Athens in 411 and 404, when those with democratic leanings were forced to flee; and (4) he did not seem to speak out against the atrocities that were being committed during the dictatorship.

Socrates own preferred form of government was ruled by “the one who knows” (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.8.10-11). He seems to have advocated a rigid form of monarchy while at the same time repudiating despotism. Although he maintained, for example, that it was “the business...of the ruled to obey” the ruler, he also believed that all legitimate rule must be based upon the consent of the governed and upon the laws of the state (*Memorabilia* 4.6.12). Democracy for Socrates, on the other hand, represents rule by the unfit. Xenophon goes so far as to have him describe the Athenian assembly as “audience of dunces and weaklings.” (*Memorabilia* 3.7.5).

In 399 BC Socrates, the “gadfly” of the Athenian community, was put on trial on the stated charges of corrupting the youth of Athens and for impiety (not believing in the gods of Athens). It should be kept in mind, however, that the accusers of Socrates, Anythus, Meletus and Lycon, were leaders in the restored Athenian democracy. Their decision to bring Socrates to trial was almost certainly motivated by their perception that his influence was a threat to the democracy. But because Socrates was protected under the general amnesty, they couldn’t “get him” for anything he had said or done prior to 403. To mention any of Socrates questionable associates or activities during the dictatorship in their charges would have caused their suit to be thrown out. They had to come up with some other “crimes” that Socrates committed during the previous four years.

The charges of corrupting the youth and impiety can, therefore, be viewed as a pretext used by Socrates’ accusers to punish him for holding political views that were clearly a threat to the newly reestablished Athenian democracy.

It should be noted, however, that in bringing these charges against Socrates, Meletus and Anythus’ real aim was probably to frighten Socrates into fleeing from Athens before the trial, and thus rid the city of a troublemaker. Indeed, Socrates could easily have fled from Athens both before and after the trial if he really wanted to do so.

Authorship of *The Apology*

The Apology is Plato’s account of Socrates’ defense speech before the Athenian jury that was trying him. Remember, Socrates never wrote anything himself. Most of what we know about him comes from Plato.

Although Plato wrote the text a few years after the trial took place, and probably took some creative liberties in transcribing Socrates’ speech, we should probably regard the text as more or less historically accurate. For one thing, many of the readers of Plato’s text would have been present at the trial, and certainly would have raised a stink if Plato had stretched the truth too far (Taylor 156-157).

The Meaning of Apology

The term apology (from the Greek “*apologia*”) literally means “speech before.” The term should not be understood in the English sense of “a statement expressing remorse or regret” (as you read *The Apology*, it will be clear that Socrates in no way regrets the way he has lived his life). An apology is a statement of defense of one way of life against accusers: in this specific case, it is Socrates’ defense of his philosophical way of life against the charges raised by Anythus and Meletus.

The Form of the Work

Most of Plato’s works are written in the form of dialogues. A dialogue is a dramatic work with two or more participants. *The Apology* is somewhat unique in the Platonic corpus in that it was written by Plato as a monologue. Despite a few comments made by Meletus, Socrates is essentially the sole speaker in the text.

The text itself is neatly divided into three parts:

Part One (17a-35d): Socrates’ main defense speech. The speech is delivered after his accusers had leveled their charges of impiety and corruption against him. After Socrates finishes his speech, the jury deliberates and returns a verdict of guilty as charged.

Part Two (35e-38b): Socrates’ Proposal of a Counter-Penalty. According to Athenian custom, a guilty person had the right to propose a penalty that would fit the nature of his crime. We would expect Socrates here to propose an alternative to execution (such as a reasonable fine), but instead he further alienates the jury with a touch of sarcasm. They return with a penalty of death.

Part Three (38c-42a): Socrates’ Final Address. Socrates is given the opportunity to say a few closing remarks to the jury, and delivers a philosophical statement on death and the afterlife.

Speech I: Main Defense Speech (17a-35d)

Opening Comments (17a-18a)

Socrates’ accusers (Anythus and Meletus) have just made their case and have warned the jury not to be deceived by Socrates whom they have portrayed as a notorious liar.

Socrates begins his defense by making a request to be allowed to speak in his own simple language. His aim, he says, is not flattery, but simply to speak the truth.

The distinction that is being made here is between rhetoric, which uses clever language and any means necessary (including falsehood) to persuade an audience, and philosophy, which used simple, direct language to arrive at the truth.

Note: We should not take Socrates too seriously when he says that he lacks any skill in

public speaking. What we have here is a man who claims not to be able to make a speech, but who actually observes all rules of classical rhetoric. In fact, the speech is considered by many to be one of the great masterpieces of Western oratory. Allen takes this contradiction as an example of Socratic irony, rather than as an attempt by Socrates to be duplicitous (Allen 63-64).

Question 1: If the truth is best revealed through the use of simple and direct language, as Socrates here maintains, why do you think so many thinkers and politicians throughout the centuries have instead resorted to using complex and often confusing language to convey their ideas? Do you think that the most important ideas can be expressed in simple terms? Why or why not?

The Old Accusers (18b-20c)

Socrates divides his accusers into two camps: the old accusers and the new accusers (Anytus and Meletus).

In this section, Socrates addresses the charges leveled against him by his old accusers. His aim, he says, is to eliminate any prejudices that may have been held against him from the past, since these are likely to prevent him from having a fair trial.

Sallis points out that this is a rather curious way for someone trying to defend himself in an Athenian court of law to proceed: “rather than immediately setting out in his speech to try to remove the accusations actually brought against him, Socrates does precisely the opposite, adding accusations and multiplying the number of accusers. So, it appears that Socrates begins his defense by doing just the opposite of what he really needs to do in order to defend himself effectively” (31-32).

Among the older charges leveled against him was that he is a “clever man,” who (1) “speculated about the heavens above and searched into the earth beneath,” and who (2) “makes the weaker cause appear the stronger.”

Socrates denies that he ever talked on the questions of natural philosophy that Aristophanes put in his mouth in *The Clouds* [remember, he gave up this pursuit early on to focus on moral matters]. He also denies being a “professional” teacher of goodness. This is a none too subtle jab at the Sophists (e.g., Gorgias of Leontini) who claimed to be teachers of wisdom and who charged abundantly for their services.

Socrates’ Wisdom (20d-24b)

Socrates maintains that the origins of the charges against him stem from the fact that he has gotten a name for being “wise.”

He recounts how the Oracle of Delphi, the legendary priestess at the temple of Apollo, was asked by Chaerephon whether anyone was wiser than Socrates and her answer was “no.” Upon hearing about this response, Socrates takes it upon himself to examine politicians, poets and craftsmen in an attempt to prove the Oracle wrong by finding someone wiser than himself. What he discovers is that, while all of these men fancied themselves to be wise, they had no knowledge of the most important matters.

These men may have a certain amount of skill (*techne*) but they lack wisdom (*sophia*). To make matters worse, they are not even aware of how ignorant they actually are.

Socrates concludes that the source of his wisdom lies precisely in being aware of how

little he actually knows. Thus humility, for Socrates, becomes a necessary precondition for attaining wisdom. He has it; the so-called experts lack it.

Of course, this kind of questioning was bound to annoy the victims of Socrates' questions. This is the origin of the ancient charge that he "makes the weaker cause appear the stronger."

Question 2: Do you think that it is true that the wisest human beings are those who are aware of how little they actually know? If so, why do you think that this might be the case?

The First Charge: Corrupting the Youth (24c-25e)

Socrates now turns to the charges leveled against him by his new accusers, Anytus and Meletus. Meletus comes to the stand and Socrates begins to interrogate him.

Socrates' aim here is to demonstrate that Meletus is not to be taken seriously, since he has no real understanding of the charges that he has leveled against Socrates.

In turn, Meletus has to avoid any reference to political matters, lest the case get dismissed for falling under the general amnesty (Taylor 162-163). Because of this delicate situation, Meletus can't help looking like a moron

First, Socrates addresses the issue of corrupting the youth. Surely, Meletus must understand the nature of corruption if he is accusing Socrates with this crime. The best that Meletus can do, however, is to try to argue that Socrates alone in all of Athens makes young men worse by his influence on them---a rather ludicrous position.

Question 3: Respond to the following thesis: "If a philosopher teaches young men and women to question everything, this will undermine the foundations of many, if not all, of our institutions, and will ultimately lead to the breakdown of society. There are certain truths, therefore, that must be accepted without question if we are to function as a political community."

The Second Charge: Impiety (26a-28a)

Socrates now moves to the charge of impiety. The substance of the charge is that Socrates does not worship the gods of Athens but, instead, practices a "strange religion." Meletus has also accused him of being an atheist. But Socrates wants to know how he can be an atheist and at the same time a practitioner of a strange religion, since the two positions are basically incompatible. Again, Meletus has been shown to contradict himself.

Once again we witness Socrates fanning the flames of his own destruction. Socrates' cross-examination of Meletus and his successful attempt to expose him as a boob is aimed solely at uncovering the truth. His humiliation of Meletus, however, is not likely to have endeared him to the members of the jury.

Although Socrates has objectively succeeded in proving the charges against him groundless, he has not persuaded the jury of his innocence. To do so he needs to use more rhetoric and less logic, something he cannot bring himself to do.

Socrates' Mission (28b-30d)

Now we come to one of the most important sections of the Apology, and to the heart of Socrates' defense of his philosophical lifestyle.

Socrates is aware that his life is in danger because of his philosophical position, but he refused to be cowed by the thought of death. He makes the analogy between the courage he must show in maintaining his philosophical convictions to that which he was asked to show as a soldier in defense of Athens. Just as he would not have disobeyed his general's commands to remain at his post despite the dangers, so too will he now not disobey the command of God to pursue wisdom and to continue to examine himself and others (28e). Therefore, if he were offered an acquittal upon the condition of abandoning philosophy, he would not accept it (29c).

In 30c-e Socrates makes the claim that if the jury condemns him to death they will ultimately be doing more harm to themselves than to him, since it is impossible that a better man can be harmed by a worse one (30d). Since the human being is essentially soul, the only real harm that can be done to us is to our souls. Since no one else can harm our souls, only we can harm ourselves by performing bad acts. Therefore, if the city of Athens kills him it will cause more harm to itself than to him, since it will: (1) corrupt itself by killing an innocent man (30d), and will (2) be left without its social conscience (30e).

Question 4: Socrates believes that his commitment to a life in pursuit of wisdom is more important than even the threat of death. Do you think that Socrates position is a reasonable one or does it strike you as being somewhat fanatical? Is there any commitment in your own life that you would not abandon even in the face of suffering or death?

Question 5: Socrates maintains that doing wrong injures the wrong-doer more than it injures the victim. Do you agree with this view? Can you give any examples to support your position?

Question 6: Socrates argues that no harm can ultimately befall a good person, since the only real harm that we can do is to ourselves. There have been many good individuals throughout history (St. Paul, Thomas More, Martin Luther King), however, who have faced suffering, pain and death for doing what they thought was right. Given this fact, would you agree with Socrates that a virtuous person is somehow invulnerable to harm? If so, in what way is he/she invulnerable?

Socrates as Athen's Gadfly (30e-31c)

Socrates here compares himself to a big, annoying fly whose buzzing awakens drowsy Athenians from their moral and intellectual slumber.

Question 7: We often view people who consistently challenge our preconceived notions of what is right or wrong as pests who are to be avoided at all costs. Can you think of any "gadflies" in your own life who constantly challenge you to become a better person? What is your own attitude towards these persons, and what do you think your life be like without them?

Socrates' Avoidance of Public Life (31d-33b)

Socrates feels compelled to explain why if he was so concerned about the well-being of the city of Athens, he didn't enter political life. He answers that the gods have dissuaded him from this vocation. If he had entered political life and had attempted to correct the

injustices in the city, he would have been killed: “A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time.” (32a)

The two incidents that he cites to help make his point—one of which occurred during the democracy and the other during the oligarchy—are geared towards demonstrating his political neutrality. This indicates that Socrates was well aware of the political motivation behind his trial.

Socrates’ Followers (33c-34b)

It is no small coincidence that all of Socrates’ followers, including Plato, were of a decidedly anti-democratic mindset. As I.F. Stone puts it:

“The various followers of Socrates disagreed, often as violently as modern scholars, as to just what Socrates had taught them, even---and especially---on the nature of virtue. But on one matter they all agreed: They all rejected the polis. They all saw the human community not as a self-governing body of citizens with equal rights but as a herd that required a shepherd or king. They all treated democracy with condescension or contempt.” (14)

Socrates maintains, however, that although some of his young disciples (most notably Critas and Alcibiades) turned out to have less than democratic tendencies, he can not be held responsible for their behavior, since he is not a teacher. This claim that Socrates is not a teacher surfaces repeatedly in Plato’s dialogues. In the *Theatetus*, for examples, Socrates compares himself to a midwife rather than as a teacher:

I am so far like the midwife that I cannot myself give birth to wisdom, and the common reproach is true, that, though I question others, I can myself bring nothing to light because there is no wisdom in me....Those who frequent my company at first appear, some of them, quite unintelligent, but, as we go further with our discussions, all who are favored by heaven make progress at a rate that seems surprising to others as well as to themselves, although it is clear that they have never learned anything from me. The many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within. But the delivery is heaven’s work and mine. (*Theatetus* 150c-d)

Concluding Comments (34c-35d)

Socrates’ defense is now officially over. According to Athenian custom, Socrates could now plead for mercy from the court for the sake of his dependents (e.g., wife, children, friends). This would certainly have been a prudent thing for him to do, but he refuses to on the grounds that it would represent an ignoble attempt by him to seduce the jury.

His fate is now left in the hands of the gods and the members of the jury.

Speech III Final Address

Warning to the Jurors (38d-39e)

Not surprisingly, the jury returns with a vote for death by an even larger margin than they had found Socrates guilty (360-140) (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 2.42). According to Athenian custom, Socrates is given the chance to make a final statement to the jury. He denies that he was convicted for lack of a solid defense, but rather that he was convicted because he refused to pander to the jury (i.e., appeal to their pity).

One can always, he says, find ways to escape death if one is willing to compromise one's beliefs. "The difficulty," however, "is not in avoiding death, but in avoiding unrighteousness; for that runs faster than death." (39b)

Question 10: Why do you think that human beings are so much more concerned about the health and welfare of their bodies than about the well-being of their souls? Do you think that this might be an indication of our societal materialism or of our lack of confidence in an afterlife?

Reflections on Death (40a-42a)

Socrates remains confident in his belief that death is nothing to worry about (40c-41c). He argues that either the dead experience nothing, in which case at least they are at peace. And if there is an afterlife, as the legends foretell, then the virtuous will be rewarded there for their good deeds. In either case, death certainly must be viewed as a good thing.

Socrates is typically viewed by commentators on the text as an avowed agnostic. Taylor, however, argues that that Socrates is a convinced believer in an afterlife, rather than the agnostic that he is usually portrayed as. The evidence for this lies in the strong language that he uses to express his "hope" and his allusions to the "divinity" of the soul (167)

Question 11: Do you think that Socrates makes a convincing case that the virtuous need not fear death? Why or why not?

Suggestions for Further Reading

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