
Commentary on Plato's *Apology of Socrates*

using the G.M.A. Grube translation

(*Plato, Five Dialogues, Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*,
Hackett Publishing Company, 1981, pp. 24-44)

Unless Plato had already written some short dialogues to illustrate Socrates' technique of questioning (like the *Euthyphro*), the *Apology of Socrates* is the earliest thing by him that we have. This would mean that it is the oldest extant document of Greek philosophy -- everything earlier (e.g. *Parmenides*) was lost and is known only through quoted fragments in later works, like those of Plato himself. There is something fitting in this. Socrates substantially refounded philosophy, and the *Apology* is still, all by itself, about the best introduction to Western philosophy that there is.

At the trial for his life in 399 BC, Socrates astonished his listeners by appearing, despite his vigorous defense, to *deliberately* get himself found guilty and condemned to death. What he had said was then a matter of some curiosity, but there were no Greek court reporters, and of course no audio or video tape, so there was no official record, or news recording, of the trial. If Socrates' words were going to be remembered, the spectators were going to have to record them. This is what happened, and various versions of the *Apology of Socrates* were produced. Only two survive, Plato's and one by Xenophon.

A friend of Socrates, Xenophon also produced the valuable *Recollections of Socrates* (or *Memorabilia*). Unfortunately, Xenophon was not a philosopher, did not, I expect, understand Socrates very well, also, as he admits, was not at the trial, and did not try to reproduce the whole speech. Plato has his own presence at the trial affirmed by Socrates himself, who mentions Plato by name twice in Plato's *Apology*. Xenophon's *Apology* thus is an abbreviated and disappointing document next to Plato's, but it does tell us a couple of things that we might not know otherwise. These will be noted at the appropriate points in the course of Socrates' speech.

Now, although the word "apology" is the direct descendant into English of the Greek word *apología*, the meaning has changed. Socrates was not *apologizing* or making *excuses*. He wasn't *sorry*. The Greek word *apología* simply and precisely meant a *defense*, or a *defense speech*. This meaning has been preserved in English in some related words: An "apologist" is still someone who argues a *defense* of someone or something, and "apologetics" is still a discipline or system of argued *defense* of something, usually a doctrine, cause, or institution. Socrates' speech thus might be translated *The Defense of Socrates* without the possible confusion over the modern meaning; but after long usage, it is hard to imagine calling the *Apology* anything else.

Part of the tradition of the *Apology* is that it is the first complete text read in the formal study of Classical Greek. This was not the case with me, since my Greek professor at UCLA in 1968

decided that we should break with tradition and read the *Euthyphro* and *Crito* instead. I'm not sure that was an improvement on tradition -- more like variety for the sake of variety -- though that meant variety for the professor rather than for us students.

Although Socrates is on trial for his life, his prosecutors (Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon) are private individuals. There is no public prosecutor at Athens, no District Attorney. All actions are brought by private individuals, although they themselves might be politically prominent, or officials. If there is a murder, and basically no one cares about the victim, there might be no prosecution -- though the city did take an interest in murder cases, because of the pollution, and from an early date the Council of the Areopagus, the ancient senate of the aristocracy, undertook to protect the state from vengeful spirits. It is also noteworthy in the *Apology* that Socrates never mentions a *judge*. All his remarks are addressed to the jury, and from the evidence of this text alone, we might not know whether there was a judge or not. We do know, however, even from the *Euthyphro*, that Socrates is in the court of one of the major officials of Athens, the "King Archon."

There were nine archons (*árkhon* = ruler, regent, commander) in the classic constitution at Athens. Six were judges, the Thesmothetae. The other three were the *Eponymous Archon*, after whom the year was named (Athenian dates were in the form "the year so-and-so was Archon"), the Polemarch, who was the commander-in-chief, and the King, who succeeded to the religious duties of the original Kings of Athens. One of these duties was to preside over court cases involving religion. That included murders, which involved the pollution of spilled blood, and accusations of impiety. That is why Socrates was in the King's court. He was accused of impiety.

The King Archon, the judge, is not mentioned by Socrates because he has almost no power. Most of the power in the courtroom is in the hands of the jury, which is said to be 501 jurors. There is no screening of jurors. The jury is pretty much any free adult male citizen who shows up. The comedy *The Wasps* by Aristophanes is about an old man who amuses himself by getting on a jury every day, and by voting everyone guilty. The jury has all but absolute power. At the same time, there was not much in the way of rules of evidence. The prosecution and defense could say pretty much whatever they wanted. Thus, ironically, Socrates, who in a sense was put to death for practicing free speech, nevertheless had more freedom of speech at his trial than most defendants do in the courts of the United States of America, where judges can *prohibit* defendants from making certain kinds of defenses (e.g. that the law under which they are charged is unjust or unconstitutional). All Socrates had to worry about was how to appeal to the jury, but he then made his defense in such a way as to antagonize the jury instead.

The procedure of the trial is that the prosecutor or prosecutors make their speeches, accusing the defendant, then the defendant makes his defense speech. This is where the *Apology* begins, as we can tell, since Socrates initially comments on what he has just heard from his prosecutors. After the defense, the jury votes innocent or guilty. Only a bare majority is needed, though, as Socrates mentions, the prosecution is fined if it does not get a fifth of the vote. In this case, Socrates is barely (by 30 votes) found guilty. Then we get what today is called the "penalty phase of the trial." The prosecution proposes a punishment it thinks is fitting, in this case death. Then Socrates proposes a counter-penalty. The jury again votes to pick which penalty to impose.

Socrates is condemned to death. The final part of the *Apology*, then, is what Socrates has to say after that vote, after he knows that he is sentenced to die.

Greek words here are rendered with their accents, but *êtas* and *ômegas*, i.e. long e's and o's, are shown with a circumflex, just to indicate length, unless they otherwise have an acute or grave accent, which is then shown instead. Greek accents indicated *tones*, just like in Chinese, except that a polysyllabic Greek word usually only has one tone. Acute accents were rising tones, grave falling, and circumflexes rising and falling. Iota subscripts are not, regretfully, indicated.

This is largely written up from lectures [given](#) on the *Apology* between 1987 and 1999, using the G.M.A. Grube translation, in different editions. Some comment and complaint will be made below about the translation, but it does seem to me overall a fine rendering. Although it may be possible to read this commentary independent of the *Apology* itself, it would probably be better to have read the text first.

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The Defense (17a-35e)

- Preliminaries
 - 17a. Socrates begins with a bit of characteristic irony. He does not know how the jury has been affected by the speeches of his accusers, but they were so persuasive that he has almost forgotten himself (Grube says, "carried away in spite of myself"). This seems unlikely, but it is typical of Socrates. Nor is recognition of his irony just a later or modern observation about him, since in the *Apology* itself Socrates mentions it, at 38a -- the verb he uses, *eironeúomai*, can

also mean "dissemble" or "feign ignorance," which is what happens in irony and sarcasm: someone says, in a certain way, the opposite of what they really mean. Also characteristic, however, is what Socrates says next, which is that "hardly anything of what they said is true." Irony, where it is hard to tell if Socrates really believes what he says, is thus followed by very blunt statements that he certainly believes. His accusers are liars.

- 17a. "Men of Athens." Socrates usually addresses the jury as *ándres Athênâtoi*, "Athenian men" (**men**, Latin *vir*, not "persons"). Grube's translation often says "gentlemen," or the like, instead, which sounds more modern, but doesn't have quite the same flavor: Socrates is addressing the citizens of Athens, and uses those terms. A modern defendant could similarly think of themselves as addressing the "People" in a criminal case, when addressing the jury, who represent the People, but this no longer occurs to anyone today. Now, the *prosecutors* like to think of *themselves* as representing the People -- when often what they represent is a political **class** of lawyers, politicians, and police, whose interests are sometimes an outrage to the People.
- 17b. Socrates says he is accused of being "an accomplished speaker." He says if that means speaking the truth, then it is accurate. But if it means speaking in "embroidered and stylized phrases," like his accusers, then he is not like that. The unintentional and rather bitter irony here, of a different kind, is that to be able to use "embroidered and stylized phrases," his accusers would have to have been *trained* in speaking, and that training would have been from those who make that their business, namely the **Sophists**. But Socrates' accusers accuse *him* of being a Sophist, while they profess to despise them -- Antyus is quoted in the *Meno* saying that Sophists "clearly cause the ruin and corruption of their followers" (91c). So men who profess to despise Sophists and prosecute Socrates for being one, actually use the tools of the Sophists against one who really is not one.
- 17c. Socrates refers to his manner of speech as "things spoken at random and expressed in the first words that come to mind." We know from Xenophon that Socrates had not prepared a defense and just walked into court. The result that we find here may seem very considered and accomplished, but one thing to keep in mind is that the text is produced, not by Socrates, but by **Plato**, probably the greatest stylist in the history of philosophy. Plato need not have been manufacturing Socrates' speech for it to be reproduced in the manner of Plato's own writing.
- 17c. A warning that Socrates is concerned with justice, not with words or anything else. This is already putting the jury on notice.
- 17c. Having never appeared in a court before, Socrates warns the jury that he will speak in his "usual manner." In other words, they are going to have to accommodate him, not he them.
- 17c. "Market place." Socrates talks to anyone and is thus drawn to public places. Xenophon tells us (*Memorabilia* I-10) that "in the morning he went to the public promenades [*perípatoi*] and training-grounds [*gymnásia*]; in the forenoon he was seen in the market..." [Loeb ed., p.7]. The Agora, the market place, is probably the most public and busiest place in Athens. Since Socrates doesn't do much buying or selling himself, the only reason he is there is to talk to people. It is also

noteworthy that he is going to meet few women there, since it was not seemly for respectable women to be out in such a place. Men, servants, or slaves are going to do the shopping.

- 17c. "Bankers' tables." We might not know apart from references like this that there were bankers in the Athenian marketplace. Greek bankers, however, are probably not much in the business of taking deposits and making loans. They are mainly going to be money changers, what now we would call currency speculators, and loan sharks. The ancient world never saw anything like modern banking. The Roman Empire never sold bonds, and we don't have any evidence of letters of credit, bank notes, or any other of the modern instruments of banking. Money was so new that no one even had a very good idea what it was all about (not too much different, really, today). When trade itself was regarded as morally questionable, charging interest was well beyond respectable practices (again, not too much different, in some quarters, today).
- 17d. "Age of seventy." We learn Socrates' age. This may explain a lot. People in the 5th century BC did not ordinarily live to seventy. **Thirty-five** is more like the average age of people in ancient cemeteries, but even in more recent times, as in Ireland, average lifespan has sometimes only been about **nineteen**. Socrates, therefore, has already perhaps lived something like two, or three, lifetimes. He has also outlived most of his own generation. He often refers to the youth of his accusers and of the jury. These are people who did not grow up with him but only know him by reputation. The reputation doesn't have much to do with what he is like. But his age may have a lot to do with why he is in trouble. His own contemporaries, who would never have dreamed of trying to effect a judicial murder on him, are mostly gone. He, and they, are now strangers to most of the jury.
- 18a. "The excellence of a judge..." Socrates is not just putting the jury on notice that he is going to proceed in his usual manner, he is telling the jury how to be a good jury. This does not seem so remarkable today, when juries are constantly told what to do, what (not) to say, and what (not) even to think, but it is unfamiliar and unwelcome to Athenian juries, who see trials more as entertainment than as discovery processes. We might take that as a lesson about a system where all authority is vested in one irresponsible agency. Unfortunately, the modern courtroom goes to the opposite extreme, vesting all authority in the judge. Modern judges would fail Socrates' test also, since their concern is **not** "whether what I say is just or not." And modern jurors, treated as peons, are told that the justice of a case is not their concern. The system of checks and balances, between judge and jury, established by the Founders of the United States in the Constitution, has failed, as judges have seized all power in their courtrooms, aided and abetted by other judges (the Supreme Court). What Socrates says gets him in trouble with his jury, but anyone saying similar things today -- on the "excellence (*areté*/virtue) of a judge" -- would receive summary jail sentences for "contempt of court" from modern judges suffering from the "insolence of office."
- Old Accusations
 - Reputation

- 18a. The first problem is the reputation Socrates has. "Lying accusations" have been made against him for years, and he has previously never responded. Indeed, Socrates' technique, as we see in the *Euthyphro*, is simply to ask questions. He has never really explained himself. Now he will do so.
- 18b. "From childhood." Again, the important notice that Socrates' listeners have grown up with his reputation, not necessarily with him. Those who knew him personally are largely gone.
- 18c. "All things in the sky and below the earth, who makes the worse argument the stronger." This is the formula that Socrates repeats, whose origin will be evident shortly. It says a lot about the public perception of Greek philosophers. "All things in the sky and below the earth" would specifically refer to the Presocratics or, as the Greeks said themselves, the "natural philosophers" (*physikoi philosophoi*), whose concerns mainly were, indeed, the sky and the earth. Socrates is not interested in this stuff at all, and really has very conservative religious ideas about cosmology. "Who makes the worse argument the stronger." This is the reputation of the Sophists, who said that they taught "virtue" (*areté* or "excellence"), but who ended up largely teaching rhetoric and persuasion.

The connection was that the Greeks came to think of human virtue or excellence as *political*, since the life of the Greek city (*pólis*) seemed about the most noble activity for human participation -- a formula that excluded women from human excellence, since women were largely excluded from politics. Politics in a democratic city like Athens meant participation in the Assembly (*Ekklêsía*, the origin, from a later Christian context, of the word "church"), which consisted of all the free, adult, male citizens of the city. In turn, participation would mean, not just showing up and voting, but actually rising to speak and to propose actions. To speak well, one needs training in rhetoric, and to propose actions persuasively, one needs training in persuasion. The Sophists (*Sophistaí*, whose name simply meant "master of one's craft," or someone who knows something), became the teachers, the travelling paid teachers, of these skills. However, this began to get them a certain reputation. In teaching persuasion, what exactly is to be subject of persuasion? Well, it must be *anything*, or anything that someone is going to pay to learn to be persuasive about. This gave the Sophists a reputation of opportunism and lack of principles. They would teach you how to prove anything. Of course, not just anything can be proven. It is going to take dishonest and deceptive arguments to be persuasive about a lot of things. Today, a deceptive and fallacious turn of argument can be called a

sophism, the constant practice of such is *sophistry*, and someone engaged in such practice is a *sophist*. What the Sophists *did* thus gives us the modern meanings for what they were called. Otherwise, the *original* meaning of *sophistés* is preserved in a word like "sophisticated," which implies knowledge, either the worldly knowledge of an individual or the complex adaptation of advanced knowledge to objects.

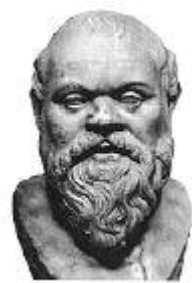
So to teach persuasion, the Sophists would "make the worse argument the stronger." But, whatever the quality of his own arguments, Socrates was not a paid teacher, did not teach persuasion, and in fact did not teach anything, except indirectly. All he did was ask questions. Thus, the terms of the reputation that Socrates has, although applicable to many Greek philosophers -- though not really all to one at the same time -- has nothing to do with him whatsoever.

- 18c. "Those who study these things do not even believe in the gods." Socrates is later going to be accused of being an atheist. Although this is ridiculous as a charge against Socrates, the Presocratics and the Sophists were vulnerable. That the Presocratics replaced most **mythic** talk about the gods with impersonal descriptions of nature was probably much more noticeable than that some of them, like Heraclitus and Xenophanes, also talked about the gods. With the Sophists, things were a little worse. The greatest and most famous of them, **Protagoras of Abdera**, said the gods were a difficult subject, life was short, and so he had nothing to say about them. Since Socrates' accusers see him as a sort of generic philosopher, all of this is attributed to him.
- 18d. "Writer of comedies." Although Socrates avoids mentioning him by name here, he does mention him, namely Aristophanes, shortly.

Greek comedies are really extraordinary artifacts. Topical and political, but also bawdy and scatological, the only modern equivalent would be a truly X-rated version of *Saturday Night Live* -- actors playing male parts (no women on stage) were easily identifiable because they wore large stuffed phalluses. Eleven such plays by Aristophanes (died c.388) have survived. One of those, *Lysistrata* (c.413), even became a footnote to the history of Los Angeles. *Lysistrata* was an anti-war play, expressing Aristophanes' frustration and unhappiness with the interminable Peloponnesian War (431-404) between Athens and Sparta. His approach, however, was to have the women of Athens go on a *sex strike* until the men ended the war. The comic possibilities of this are not hard to imagine. Since World War I had left many Americans feeling

frustrated, unhappy, and disillusioned with its outcome, there was a fair amount of anti-war sentiment in the 20's, and some producers in Los Angeles decided to capitalize on that by staging *Lysistrata*. Unfortunately, the sentiment of the times, however pacifist, was not up to the level of bawdiness in the play: It was shut down as obscene by the police. A probably apocryphal story about the raid has the captain of the Vice Squad demanding to know who had written such "smut." He was told the name of the author, but of course had never heard of the man, and had no idea that Aristophanes was somewhat outside the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles Police Department. But, thinking about the name, he suddenly realized he knew who it was: "Harry Stophanes!" So a very perplexed Harry may have ended up in jail that night.

- 19a. "As the god may wish." Socrates often refers to "the god" (*ho theós*). If Socrates is thinking of a particular god, and he is, he never does actually *name* the god, though later we will have no difficulty understanding who it is. In older translations of the *Apology*, it is not uncommon to find Socrates referring to "God" rather than "the god." This is an accurate translation for mediaeval or modern Greek, where the article tends to be used with "God" (as in Arabic, *Allâh* = *al-Ilâh*, "the God"), but not for ancient Greek. Nor is the lack of a proper name unusual. Gods who are being invoked in a specific case are often left unnamed in ancient religious practice. This was common with the Egyptians (the "good god" was the King) and can also be seen in Homer, who invokes a Muse as "the goddess" without naming her, and also in [Parmenides](#), who details a long instruction from a goddess who is never named. The more traditional translation, however, may also have been based on some idea that Socrates was a *monotheist*. Plato and Aristotle, maybe, but there is no evidence of monotheism in the *Apology*, or in the early dialogues that we can confidently say reflect Socrates' own ideas. No, "the god" is a common locution, as common as Socrates' oaths involving Zeus or Hera; and the more that this god happened to mean personally to Socrates, the less likely that he would actually pronounce his name. Indeed, the reluctance of the Jews to speak the Name of the God of Abraham and Isaac meant that its true pronunciation was actually forgotten: the vocalization written for the "tetragrammaton," the four consonants of the Name of God in the Bible, is that of the substitute word to be said instead, *Adônâi*, "the LORD" (as it is translated, and written, in the King James Bible).
- Defense
 - 19b. Socrates must now answer the charges implicit in the kind of reputation he has, again that he is guilty of "studying things in the sky and below the earth," that "he makes the worse into the stronger argument," and that "he teaches these same things to others." Here we have the



- repetition of the characteristics of the Presocratics and the Sophists seen at 18c, with the addition of the characteristic of the Sophists as teachers.
- 19c. "Comedy of Aristophanes...walking on air and talking a lot of other nonsense about things of which I know nothing at all." This is a rather strong rejection by Socrates of any association with the Presocratics or Sophists, their projects or their reputations. This is a fundamental feature of the *Apology*: his accusers attribute all sorts of ideas and attitudes to Socrates that have nothing to do with him.

The play in question by Aristophanes was the *The Clouds* (423, rewritten 418), whose name comes from Socrates being shown floating up in the clouds -- like all philosophers. Everything that Aristophanes wanted to ridicule about the Presocratics and the Sophists he attributed to the man who was already the most famous philosopher at Athens, Socrates. This may, at the time, have all been in good fun. The story is that the mask of the actor playing Socrates, who was legendarily ugly, was so good a caricature that Socrates himself stood up in the audience so that it could be compared to him. This makes it sound like Socrates was willing to take the joke. Exactly how much in fun Aristophanes intended it all is a good question. He certainly didn't like what the Presocratics and Sophists represented, but he hardly seems like one to blame Socrates for losing the war with Sparta (by undermining Athenians virtues), since Aristophanes never liked the war anyway. Aristophanes was, in his own way, deeply conservative, and he disapproved of most new-fangled things, like Euripides' plays. Socrates would not be immune to that disapproval. In Plato's *Symposium*, a drinking party where Socrates and Aristophanes are both present, they seem friendly enough. By the time of Socrates' trial, twenty-four years had passed since the first performance of the play, and, as Socrates says, some people have grown up knowing Socrates more from the play than from life. Aristophanes was still alive in 399; and if he was really friendly to Socrates, then Socrates might have brought him in as a witness. But then that would have required planning a defense, and this is what Socrates didn't do. If Aristophanes had been worried about him, he might have come in on his own. So it is hard not to suspect that Aristophanes was not close to Socrates and was, at the very least, cool. But we will never know the whole story.

Ironically, the artistic misrepresentation of Socrates continues today, when a largely unrecognizable Socrates

turns up the popular movie, *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989). Like his accusers, *Excellent Adventure* presents a Socrates talking the kind of "nonsense" that must sound vaguely "philosophical" but which has nothing to do with Socrates' interests, activities, or even personality. The movie even has Socrates anticipating the title line of the long-running NBC soap opera, "Days of Our Lives." This is pretty funny, but the real Socrates still, two thousand years later, just can't get a break.

- 19c. "I do not speak in contempt of such knowledge..." If the Presocratics and Sophists really knew about the things they claimed to, then this would be real [wisdom](#), and Socrates would have to respect it. However, Socrates warns us, "**IF** someone is wise in these things." A very big "if." Such a careful qualification is always a red flag when we are dealing with Socrates. We soon discover that such people *do not* have knowledge in the matters that they claim.
- 19c. "Lest Meletus bring more cases..." An ironic jest that Meletus might sue Socrates for defamation or libel on behalf of the Presocratics and Sophists whose knowledge he could be seen disparaging. Attacking Socrates for the sins of the Presocratics and Sophists, indeed, makes no more sense than defending these same people against insult.
- 19d. "Witnesses" (*mártuyres*). Since a great many people, even in the jury, have actually heard Socrates talking at one time or another (since he does so publicly), he confidently calls on them to inform everyone else if Socrates has ever talked much about any of the subjects imputed to him. Thus, not only has Socrates nothing to do with the Presocratics and Sophists, but if the jury were to rely, not on rumor and reputation, but on their own familiarity with his activities, the charges against him could be laid to rest. However, there is not much time here for the jury to consult among themselves about their own knowledge -- in a modern courtroom, by the way, they would be prohibited from doing this -- and Socrates himself passes on to things that they may find immediately irritating, whatever his reputation was.
- 19e. "Charge a fee..." A salient characteristic of the Sophists, which Socrates hasn't mention yet, but to which he returns. Sophists make money. Socrates doesn't.
- 19e. "Yet I think it a fine thing..." Irony verging on sarcasm, since Socrates has no respect for what the Sophists do, though he hasn't let that quite out into the open yet. "...pay them a fee, and be grateful to them besides." The young could learn from their fellow citizens for free. It is a foolish gratitude that is for the privilege of paying someone money for a questionable benefit. Of course, politicians earn their keep this way, but it also troubles me to read this passage, as a teacher feeding at the public trough myself. Students pay nominal fees up front to attend a Community College like [Valley](#), but they may not realize that the drain on them

through taxes is for the rest of their lives, as the [rent seekers](#) of the system gradually but steadily increase their benefits and privileges, all under the cloak of the educational "public good." I can at least think that, in the classroom 15 or 18 hours a week, a teacher in my college is more of a real pedagogue than university professors who get away with half, or less, as much.

- 19e. "Gorgias of Leontini...Prodicus of Ceos...Hippias of Elis." A brief catalogue of Sophists. Gorgias may have been the greatest Sophist after Protagoras, but one example of the kind of thing he did is that he is supposed to have written a book that proved, (1) knowledge is impossible, (2) even if knowledge were possible, we couldn't know that, and (3) even if knowledge were possible and we could know it, we couldn't know that we knew it. "Sophistry" anyone? Elsewhere (e.g. *Meno* 96d), Socrates jokes that he was a student of Prodicus, evidently because Prodicus was interested in definitions. One incident for which Hippias was famous was his appearance at the Olympic Games, wearing nothing that he had not made himself, as a walking advertisement for his instruction in such practical skills.

The 1st Olympiad was traditionally supposed to have occurred in 776 BC. Greek historians later used the four-year period of the Olympiad as a unit of historical time, though this was never used to date either private or official transactions in ordinary life. **2001** would be the **1st** year of the **695th Olympiad**. The Games were held to celebrate the god Zeus, in his cult center at Olympia; and consequently were ended by the Christian Emperor [Theodosius I](#), who made it his business to close pagan temples, in 394 AD (the 2nd year of the 293rd Olympiad). The "Modern" Olympics were first held in 1896, at Athens, and not, to my knowledge, in honor of Zeus. 1896 would have been the 4th year of the 668th Olympiad, so the modern games are actually held a year earlier than the ancient games would have been, had they continued down to the present (the modern games are, in effect, held in [year zero](#) of the Olympiad, instead of year one). Although the Olympic Games today are criticized for being excessively nationalistic and commercialized, the Greek Olympics were, given the differences of the times, not all that different. Competition between the Greek cities was intense, and an Olympic victor could expect a hero's welcome at home, receive a pension or other privileges, mentioned by Socrates in the *Apology* itself at 36d, or have some landmark named after him, like the grove and gymnasium of *Akadêmos*, later chosen by Plato as the site for his school, the [Academy](#) (*Akadémeia*). On the other

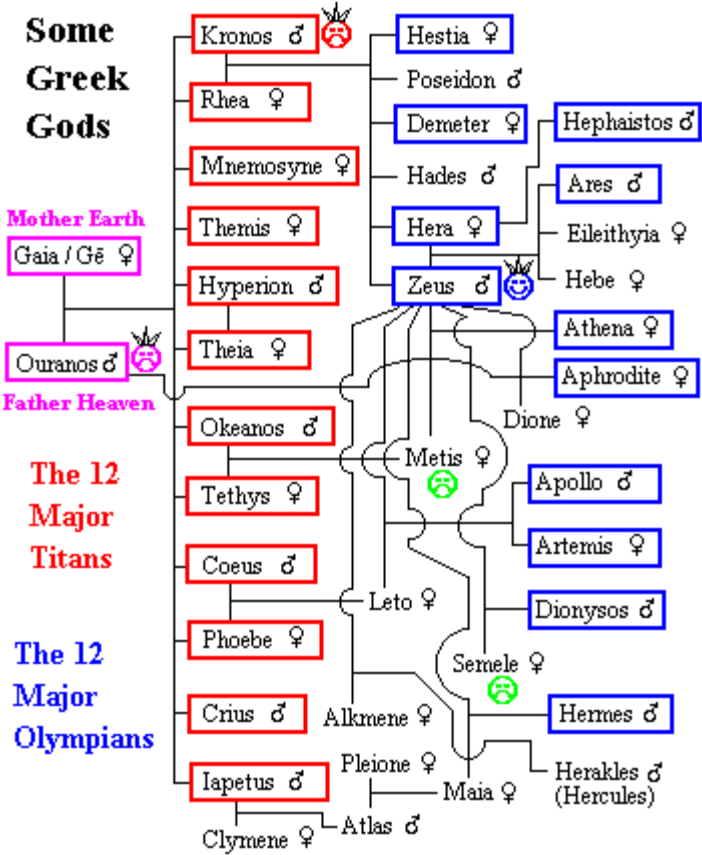
hand, Aristotle divided men into three kinds -- those who go to participate at the Olympics, those who go as spectators, and those who go to sell things. Hippias would fall into the third group.

Nothing but the foundations of the temple of Zeus at Olympia are left. Within the temple was one of the [Seven Wonders of the World](#), the great statue of Zeus by the sculptor **Phideas**, who had just finished decorating the Parthenon in Athens. The statue was moved to Constantinople, where it was later destroyed in an accidental fire. Nevertheless, Phideas' portrayal of Zeus may have influenced images of God in the art of Christian Constantinople. The stadium that survives at Olympia is still the place where the Olympic Torch is lit for every modern Olympic Games -- from Olympia carried all the way to [Ventura Blvd.](#) for the 1984 Games in Los Angeles.

- 20a. "If your sons were colts or calves..." Socrates loves his barnyard analogies. The humble professions he likes to mention, however, never seem to include his own, which was stonecutting. Here he compares a breeder or farmer to someone teaching virtue to young men.
- 20b. "...this kind of excellence, the human and social kind." A very important phrase, since this is what Socrates **has in common** with the Sophists. Both are concerned with the "human and social kind of excellence," but the Sophists with teaching it, and Socrates only with asking about it. This translation takes a couple of liberties. *Hê toiaútê areté, hê anthrôpinê te kai politiké* is the phrase in Greek [with the cases returned to nominative], "such **virtue**, the human and **political**." "Excellence" is often a better translation for *areté* than "virtue," and it may be here. Rendering *politiké*, which hardly needs translating, as "social," however, is curious. "Society," a Latin word, now does not necessarily mean politics and government, and certainly does not in the term "[civil society](#)" -- even though a powerful tendency of 20th century politics, due to [Marxism](#), is to erase the difference and abolish civil society, politicizing everything. "Human and social excellence" would be a notion compatible with liberal principles and civil society; but, in fact, this was not a Greek idea. There is private life in Greece, in the household (with the women), but not much in the way of "society" apart from political life, which literally meant the life of the *pólis*, the city. Religion, which included women also, somewhat mixed the private and the public, but was very much a matter of public concern -- as Socrates himself is charged with not honoring the "gods of the city." The modern idea of the "political" is smaller to the same degree that the modern liberal idea of private "society" is larger. The Sophists taught, and Socrates asked, about the enlarged Greek "political" life. The translation as "social" thus leaves out most of

the area of life covered by the Greek term, though it does cover matters that *politiké* does and "political" doesn't. A tough call.

- 20b-c. Callias informs Socrates that he has found a Sophist, Evenus of Paros, to teach his sons. "...and his fee is five minas." Socrates says that this is a "moderate" fee, but how moderate is it? The ins and outs of this calculation are discussed separately in "[Money in Plato's Apology of Socrates](#)." The upshot, however, is that we can put this five minas at about **\$7500** in 1990 dollars. Protagoras' fee reportedly was 100 minas, or the truly astronomical \$150,000 -- no wonder Plato mentions (*Meno* 91d) that Protagoras died rich. He was the Ivy League education of Greece, while a Sophist like Evenus was merely the typical State University education.
- 20c. "...if he really possesses this art..." Again we are warned by his careful language that Socrates may not be willing to credit a Sophist like Evenus with the knowledge he claims to possess. And, of course, he mentions all this just to deny that he makes any such claims. He does not teach for a fee, or teach at all. He is not a Sophist.
- Explanation
 - 20c. "But Socrates, what is your occupation?" Here is, in a sense, the heart of the *Apology*. Socrates is now, perhaps for the first time ever, going to explain what he has been doing, why, and how it got started.
 - 20d-e. "...a certain kind of wisdom... Human wisdom perhaps." Socrates is going to claim for himself "human wisdom" (*anthrôpinê sophía*). "...those whom I mentioned just now are wise with a wisdom more than human" -- actually, "greater than **man**," using the noun, *ánthrôpos*. If Socrates has "human wisdom," then the Presocratics and Sophists whom he has been discussing earlier would have to claim something rather more. Since he now calls that wisdom "greater than man," we already have a strong hint that they don't have it: They are not themselves "greater than man." Such a description would only fit the gods. It is thus not too surprising, later on, to learn that "only the god is wise" (23a).
 - 20e. "Do not create a disturbance..." A reminder that what Socrates has to say is not always going over well with the jury. People are talking among themselves or shouting protests, and Socrates must periodically quiet them.



- 20e. "...the god at Delphi" (*ho theòs ho en Delphoîs*). The god at Delphi, was as it happens **Apollo**. From now on, when Socrates refers to "the god," it is much more obvious who he is talking about. While Apollo, the son the Zeus and Leto, was not mythologically more important than most of the other Olympians, his shrine at Delphi came to be considered the second most sacred place, after Olympia, in all of Greece. It was even considered the center, the "navel," of the world. The importance of Delphi, however, was mainly because of the Oracle -- a priestess, the **Pythía**, who sat in an inner room

(the *ádyton*), breathed fumes coming up through the floor (fumes from gas dissolved in spring water, in geologically active Greece, or from incense burning beneath), entered a trance, and was possessed by the god Apollo. For a suitable donation, a question could be put to the Pythia and an answer obtained from Apollo. Since the words of the Pythia were hard to understand, the priests attending her wrote up the answer in verse and delivered it to the petitioner. The answers were legendarily obscure or ambiguous -- the source of the modern of meaning of "oracular," which is precisely to be obscure or ambiguous.

One example of the kinds of answers Delphi gave occurred when King Croesus of [Lydia](#), of legendary wealth, sought advice on the attack against Persia he was contemplating. [Cyrus the Great](#) had just overthrown the [Medes](#), in 550, and Croesus figured that this must reveal the weakness of the Median state, and that, in any case, Cyrus' new realm was bound to be disorganized for a while, giving the Lydians an opportunity to renew the war that had ended in 585. But he was a cautious ruler, and sent a question to Delphi, asking what would happen if he attacked the Persians. This is a revealing episode, since Croesus wasn't even a Greek. Delphi already had such a reputation. The answer that the Pythia delivered was that if Croesus attacked Cyrus, "a great kingdom will fall." Croesus thought this sounded good, so he attacked Cyrus. He had no idea who he was dealing with, and was defeated very swiftly indeed. Lydia became part of Persia in 547. But Cyrus didn't kill, torture,



or imprison Croesus. The former king was sent home to live in retirement, where he had the leisure to write back to Delphi and complain that he had been misled. The priests answered his letter, telling him that what they had said was perfectly accurate. A great kingdom had indeed fallen, namely **his**. Croesus might have worried *which* kingdom the god had referred to.

Another example came when the Persians invaded Greece in 480. King Xerxes wished to avenge the defeat of his father, Darius, at the battle of Marathon in 490.

I had a student once who worked at the "Phidippides Sports Center," a sports supply store in Encino, California. This was named after the messenger who ran the 26.22 miles -- a Marathon run -- back to Athens to report the defeat of the Persians as they were landing from their ships. Unfortunately, Phidippides dropped dead once he had blurted out, "Victory is ours." I would like to know why someone thought this would make a good event for the modern Olympics, or who would want to buy supplies from a store named after a guy who *died* doing his event!

His invasion would be a much more serious affair than Darius' amphibious landing, with a very large fleet and an army so huge that it could not even be carried by the ships. The army would have to march overland, cross over into Europe, and come down the peninsula into Greece. The Greeks, although forming a unified defensive league, hardly knew how they could resist this. Consequently, the city of Athens itself sent a question to Delphi, simply asking what to do. The god replied, "You shall find safety behind walls of wood." Some people thought this meant the Acropolis (the "high city"), the citadel of Athens. Others fled the city. Unfortunately, after the Persians had flanked and eliminated the Spartans at Thermopylae ("Hot gates," i.e. a pass with hot springs), killing King Leonidas of Sparta himself, they rolled all but unmolested into Athens, where the wooden walls of the Acropolis were simply set on fire, and all the defenders killed. Wrong interpretation. Athens, however, had just built a new fleet, under the command of **Themistocles**. He figured that the "walls of

wood" meant the ships and that he should try and bring the Persians to action. He drew them into an attack in the narrow waters between the island of Salamis and the mainland. Here the large Persian fleet could not deploy to advantage, and the Athenians started getting the better of the fight. Since most of the Persian fleet consisted of Phoenicians and Egyptians, who didn't want to be there anyway, they began to flee. Xerxes was apoplectic. Now, without a dangerous and humiliating march overland, his army was stranded in Greece, short of supplies. The Greeks allowed for the attrition of a whole year, and then the Spartans attacked and destroyed the remaining Persian force at Plataea, in 479. Themistocles had interpreted the Oracle correctly. This was the last Persian effort to invade Greece. Despite the leadership of the Spartans, the key to victory had been in the Athenian fleet. This made the fortunes of Athens for some time. 2183 years later, as Napoleon prepared to invade Britain across the English channel, a political cartoon has John Bull, who represents England, say to Napoleon, "where I sit is my own little land in the ocean -- and if you attempt to stir a foot -- there's a few of my wooden walls in the offing shall give you a Pretty Peppering." At Trafalgar, 21 October 1805, Horatio Nelson then destroyed the combined French and Spanish fleet.

Some scholarly comment has been that Athens became disillusioned with Delphi because it had favored Sparta in the Peloponnesian War, patronizing instead another oracle of Apollo at Delos. So when Socrates mentions Delphi, this actually adds to the things that are provoking the jury. However, Xenophon, who discusses at length in the *Memorabilia* the complaints that people had against Socrates, does not mention this one.

The fact that the Pythia's words were unintelligible and had to be translated by priests would lead most people to imagine that she was just babbling and that the priests made up the answers themselves. However, this kind of thing is quite familiar in shamanistic practices all around the world. For instance in Martin Scorsese's film about the Dalai Lama, *Kundun* (1997), we see a Tibetan shaman making statements while in a state of possession. These must be interpreted for the young Dalai Lama by the shaman's attendants. However, later in the movie, he starts becoming able to interpret what the shaman says himself. This will



probably not stop people from considering the whole business to be nonsense, but the accusation that these performances are deliberately *fraudulent*, i.e. the inventions of cynical and manipulative priests, is probably not true.

The room of the Pythia, the *Ádyton* ("not to be entered," seen at right in "The Priestess of Delphi" by John Collier [1850-1934]), has been as mysterious in modern investigation as in ancient. When the temple of Apollo was excavated in 1913, the archaeologists did not think they had found any trace of the *Ádyton* or any crack for fumes to come up through. This has led generations of writers to dismiss the details of the Delphi cult as fictitious. Well, the room could have been in a secret location -- still secret -- or it was destroyed by the priests of Apollo when the temple was shut down, under the Emperor [Theodosius I](#) in 392. Many sanctuaries of temples were destroyed by their own devoted priests, lest they be desecrated by Christians. If still secret, one might imagine **Indiana Jones** finding the Pythia still there. On the other hand, the 1913 archaeologists were not able to get down to the bedrock below the temple because their excavation kept filling up with water. This is suggestive of itself, since the temple was supposed to have been built over a spring, and the fumes breathed by the Pythia were supposed to come out of the water. And there have been recent developments. When a geologist, Jelle Zeilinga de Boer (a Dutchman who grew up in Indonesia and now teaches at Wesleyan University), examined the Delphi area, he identified a fault running right under the temple. In 1995, when De Boer told John Hale, an archaeologist at the University of Louisville, this led to a more careful investigation at Delphi. In 1996 it was confirmed that there was such a fault, now the Delphi Fault, and there was an intersecting fault, now the Kerna Fault. These two faults crossed each other just about right where the Temple of Apollo was built. All along the Kerna Fault were natural springs, and the kind of rock nearby, and from the which temple itself was built, was travertine, which is formed from limestone interacting with gasses from geologically active waters. When they tested the stone, it had been infused with methane (CH_4) and ethane (C_2H_6), which could have produced some of the poisonous effects recounted -- some Pythias died from breathings the fumes. When they tested the spring water, they discovered not only ethane but, more importantly, ethylene (C_2H_4). Ethylene, which would have broken down and not been preserved in the rock, is actually an anaesthetic, which in smaller doses can also produce euphoria and excitation. It also has a sweet smell, as actually reported by Plutarch, who was a priest at Delphi. New examinations of the temple revealed

pipes underneath, apparently unnoticed in 1913, that would have brought spring water under a small alcove to one side of a sunken room in the *naós*, the holy of holies, of the temple. This appears to be the *Ádyton* itself. So now we may well have the actual place and mechanism of the Pythia's dangerous intoxication. The "crack" may have just been the joints between the rocks of the chamber, through which the gasses could accumulate in the space. The present temple was built after an earthquake in 373 BC rocked the area and destroyed the original temple. The new arrangements, apparently, were not as good as previously, perhaps because the flow of gas in the water had changed, a familiar effect in such springs in geologically active areas (like Yellowstone).

- 20e-21a. "Chairephon [*Khairephôn*]...the friend of most of you, as he shared your exile and your return." What was this "exile" and "return"? These were events that attended the end of the Peloponnesian War. The Spartans occupied Athens, overthrew the democratic government, and set up a *junta* of Quislings that the Athenians called the "Thirty Tyrants." In predictable fashion, they began killing their political enemies, as Socrates mentions himself (32c-d). Thus, anyone who had been a conspicuous partisan of the democracy was in some danger, and many very prudently fled the city and went into exile. When the Spartans withdrew from Athens, the hated Thirty were promptly overthrown, and the exiles could return. This tells us something important about Chairephon, that he would have been a partisan of the democracy, and also something important about Socrates, who thus had a friend who was a conspicuous partisan of the democracy. This is an important point when Socrates is still being accused of being an enemy of the democracy and a partisan of Sparta. It seems unlikely that Chairephon would have been Socrates' friend, and have done what he did, if this had been true of Socrates. But this circumstantial evidence is only our first clue about this in the *Apology*. The entire issue of Socrates' attitude about democracy is separately discussed in "[Socratic Ignorance in Democracy, the Free Market, and Science](#)"; but the evidence of the *Apology* will also be examined at the appropriate places in the text. Chairephon, however, does provide us with a good clue.
- 21a. "...at one time.." (*pote*). We are not told when this happened, which is frustrating. Socrates could well have been an ordinary artisan for the ancient equivalent of entire lifetime, until 35, and still had another full 35 years to live a new life as a philosopher. Socrates would have been about 35 in 434, even before the Peloponnesian War, when we have several stories about Socrates serving in combat. "...if any man was wiser than I" (*eí tis emoû eíê sophóteros*). So Chairephon simply asked the Pythia, "Is anyone wiser than Socrates?" and the answer was just "No." This would

not ordinarily make for an obscure answer; but, as we shall see, it is a very perplexing riddle for Socrates.

The nature of this answer may in part be due to Chairephon using a cut-rate version of the Pythia's services, where the response would only be "yes" or "no." However, this thesis is complicated by Xenophon's version of the Pythia's response (Xenophon's *Apology* 14), which was that "no man was more free than I, or more just, or more prudent (*sôphronésteros*)." This response hardly answers a yes or no question, it doesn't even mention wisdom (*sophía*), and Socrates is quoted as actually naming Apollo. While this confirms that Socrates mentioned the Delphic answer in his speech, we may suspect from the other features that it owes more to Xenophon's imagination than to a reliable account, especially when Xenophon does not use it to explain Socrates' investigation, but instead merely as an example of the pious consulting oracles, in defense of Socrates' piety.

21a. "...the Pythian..." Although the text says the *Pythía*, the translator has added an "n" to the name, perhaps because the Greek word itself is from an adjective (though maybe not -- it has an anomalous accent). The games associated with Delphi were the "Pythian Games." "*Pýthios*" was an epithet of Apollo, perhaps from an old place name, but also because he had slain in that place the *Pýthôn*, a great snake. The shamaness Pythia, indeed, may well be older than the god, Apollo, who comes to be associated with her.

- 21b. "Whatever does the god mean?" Although simplicity itself, the "no" answer of the Pythia is for Socrates another example of Delphic obscurity. It is impossible that no one was wiser than Socrates. "I am conscious that I am not wise at all." How can this be?
- 21b. "...he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do so." The god cannot lie. We get important details of Socrates' religious beliefs in little pieces like this. We might like to know how Socrates knows this, but then nobody else seems to have asked Socrates the kinds of questions he asked others -- we have Xenophon's testimony that Antiphon the Sophist tried to pin down Socrates (*Memorabilia* VI-1), but he does not seem to have questioned Socrates in the way that Socrates questioned others.
- 21b. "I went to one of those reputed wise..." Socrates' investigation begins by seeking out one who is thought wise. This is an important feature of Socrates' method. Reputation is what people believe. In fact, the term translated "reputed" is from the verb *dokêô*, which means "to think, suppose, imagine, expect," from which comes the word *dôxa*, "belief" or "opinion." Socrates is always interested in what people believe, not with hypothetical propositions.

- 21c. "...one of our public men..." Actually, one of the *politikoi*, which we might more easily translate "politicians." Today, Socrates would have no more difficulty than then finding politicians with plenty of answers, though few sensible people today would think of politicians as the kind of people who really are **wise**.
- 21c. "I thought he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not." What we do not see is how Socrates determines this. We later get a small example of Socrates' method when he questions Meletus, but we must go to one of the dialogues proper, like the [*Euthyphro*](#), to see the whole process in detail. The basic principle, however, is simple enough: Socrates asks questions until he finds a contradiction in what the person says. In most cases this is in the testing of a definition, but it can really be applied to any claim that someone makes. The logic of this is examined in more detail in "[The Foundations of Value, Part I; Logical Issues: Justification \(quid facti\), First Principles, and Socratic Method](#)." Here we simply get the result. The politician contradicts himself, so Socrates concludes that he doesn't know what he is talking about. He is not wise. "I then tried to show him..." Socrates must have tried to explain how the politician was contradicting himself, but usually people don't want to hear that kind of thing.
- 21d. "...he came to dislike me..." Powerful people do not like to be made to look like fools, and their supporters don't like it either. So the origin of Socrates' reputation is in the embarrassment that he causes these people. In their hostility, they imagine he must be like all the other "philosophers," the Presocratics and the Sophists.
- 21d. "I am wiser than this man." So now we get the definition of the "human wisdom" that Socrates mentioned earlier. "...neither of us knows anything worthwhile..." Actually, Socrates says that neither knows anything "beautiful and good" (*kalòn k'agathòn*), which is much more evocative than "worthwhile." But the politician thinks that he knows something when he does not, while Socrates recognizes his own ignorance. *Human wisdom* is thus knowledge of *human ignorance*, and this is uniquely the possession of Socrates, which is why no one is wiser. The god, after all, did not say that Socrates was particularly wise, just that no one was wiser. "...so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know." This leaves it a little vague about just what Socrates does know. He certainly makes various claims to knowledge in the *Apology*, but he has also just said "neither of us knows anything beautiful and good." But, in general, the approach that he is basically ignorant about everything, "Socratic Ignorance," is the basis of his approach to the people he questions: Whatever they have to say, he is happy to accept it for the purpose of discussion. This is an idea that we can apply to many issues, as in "[Socratic Ignorance in Democracy, the Free Market, and Science](#)," and it also gets us the significance of the word "**philosophy**" itself (*philosophía*), as explained by Plato in the *Symposium*

(203e-204a), that we love (*philéo*) wisdom (*sophía*) precisely because we don't have it. This is the Archimedean Point for Socratic philosophy.

- 21e. "I must go to all those who had any reputation for knowledge [*or*, who were believed to know anything] to examine its meaning." Socrates enters into his "mission from the god" (like the "mission from God" of *The Blues Brothers* [1980]), which is to test the Oracle continuously by giving everyone a chance to refute it. This pious project should be compared with the effort to define "piety" in the *Euthyphro*.
- 21e. "...by the dog..." Just what "dog" this is, is a good question. The footnote in the Grube edition mentions the phrase, "by the dog, the god of the Egyptians," in the *Gorgias* (482b). There is, of course, also a dog in Greek mythology, the three-headed dog Cerberus, who guards the entrance of the Underworld. This is not a dog we would be eager to encounter.

Cerberus turns up in some episodes of the *Hercules, the Legendary Journeys* television series. However, *Hercules* and its spin-off companion, *Xena, Warrior Princess*, although using many names and incidents from Greek mythology, cannot be relied upon as a guide to that mythology, or to anything else. In the original *Hercules* episodes, which were not weekly and had enough of a budget to hire Anthony Quinn to play Zeus, they have Hercules (*Hêraklês* in Greek) living with his wife Deianeira and their children. When the series went weekly, they eliminated the wife and children with a fireball from Hera. Well, Hercules did lose a wife and children, but *he killed them himself*. He had been driven mad by Hera, of course, but he was still considered guilty enough that his Twelve Labors were performed in penance. Now, in the age of O.J., Hercules killing his wife and children certainly could not be shown on television as the acts of the protagonist. Another curious aspect to this, however, is that Deianeira was *not* the wife who was killed in the mythological version. Megara was the victim of Hercules' madness. Deianeira was his *second* wife, and she ended up killing *him*, with a potion she just thought would ensure his fidelity. Hercules then was granted immortality by the gods and married the goddess Hebe. Just how lame the material of the television series can get is indicated by their constant references to "dinars" as the money in circulation -- even though *dînâr* is the Arabic pronunciation of the Latin *denarius*, all coins from eras long after Greek mythology, or even Greek Golden Age history.

- 22a. "Those who had the highest reputation were nearly the most deficient, while those who were thought to be inferior were more knowledgeable."

We discover that we are in a catalogue of inversely proportional degrees of reputation and of wisdom. The politicians, examined first, had the best reputation but the least wisdom. Two more cases follow, as Socrates moved from the politicians to others.

- 22a-b. "...the poets... Almost all the bystanders might have explained the poems better than their authors could." While Socrates appears to respect the works of the poets, and hoped to "learn something from them," the poets were unable to explain what they had written themselves. This is actually a familiar phenomenon. The first time I saw a detailed analysis of T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, I wondered if Eliot himself had really thought of all the stuff that the critic had read into the poem. Later, in a more popular medium, seeing movie makers talk about the movies they had made, it didn't always seem like they appreciated what they had actually accomplished. For instance, Spike Lee's 1989 movie, *Do the Right Thing*, seemed a much more profound moral and political statement than one would ever know from Lee's own explicitly stated, knee-jerk leftist, political views. The character played by Lee himself in the movie is a very un-idealized, morally ambiguous person -- all by itself a sign of good art. Socrates has already discovered that good art does necessarily mean good understanding on the part of artists.
- 22c. "...poets do not compose their poems with knowledge [*sophía*, wisdom], but by some inborn talent [by nature/*phýsis*] and by inspiration, like seers [*theománteis*, holy diviners] and prophets [*khrêsmôdoí*, those who deliver oracles] who also say many fine [*kalá*, beautiful] things without any understanding of [/knowing] what they say." The poets are, as Socrates says, *enthousiázontes*, "inspired," those in (*en*) whom is the spirit (*theós*) -- getting us the word "enthusiasm," which was still used by John Locke (1632-1704) to mean possession by the Holy Spirit. This is an extremely important point. Socrates does not dismiss the poets, does not deny that they are for real and onto something. It is just that they do not produce their art through knowledge, understanding, or wisdom. They are given it by the gods. This means that Socrates allows for the [fourth characteristic of mytho-poetic thought](#), that myth is self-justifying. It is just that this is not good enough for Socrates. He doesn't just want to be told things, he wants to understand them. Nor is this just his preference. If the poets do not have *wisdom*, then this confirms the Oracle again, that no one is wiser than Socrates. So wisdom is different from what they say, however true, and must contain some feature -- understanding -- that is distinct from the bare assertion of truth. Plato agrees with these distinctions and expands on them in the *Meno* (96e-99e).
- 22c. "...they thought themselves very wise men in other respects, which they were not." Because the poets knew they were good poets, they thought that this made them wise about other things, which of course they weren't.

This seems to be an occupational characteristic today of actors, who often are not reluctant to use their public presence to endorse politicians or promote their favorite causes. They can hardly be blamed for this, since they see their causes as good, and they have a perfect right, to the extent that we have a free country, to express their opinions. There is nothing about being an actor, however, that is going to give them any *insight* into politics or the good better than most other people. Indeed, the egotism and flattery that inevitably go with the acting profession might be thought to be more of a corrupting influence than otherwise, in which case their opinions might be treated with more than ordinary scepticism. In that respect, we might recall the Greek word for "actor." The word *actor* is Latin, from a verb that we still use, *act* (*ago/agere* in Latin itself). The Greek word is *hypokrités*, which originally meant "interpreter." Of course now it has become "hypocrite" in English. A hypocrite is a kind of actor, pretending to be something that he isn't. Ironically, the best actor and hypocrite among recent politicians is the Hollywood want-to-be [Bill Clinton](#), while the actual professional actor who became President, [Ronald Reagan](#), was often ridiculed as a second-rate actor, who nevertheless exuded complete sincerity in his politics -- his enemies thought he was stupid, not insincere.

- 22c. "...the craftsmen.." The politicians, evidently, neither knew nor said anything worthwhile. The poets didn't know anything either, but at least they *said*, under inspiration, many "fine things." Now we get to the "craftsmen" -- actually the *kheirotékhnai*, the "hand-artists." We have already been told that Socrates discovered that "those who were thought to be inferior were more knowledgeable," and here we get to those who might well be "thought to be inferior." They are also, interestingly, the people of Socrates' own class. Having been a "hand-artist" himself, Socrates discovers that they are the only people who actually know what they are doing. There could be a Marxist angle to this, though there is no talk of "exploitation," and Socrates ends up being disappointed again in what he is looking for.
- 22c-d. "I knew that I would find that they had knowledge of many fine [*kalá*, beautiful] things. In this I was not mistaken; they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I." So here at least is the **real thing** -- wisdom -- and actual *knowledge* of the beauty that the poets had merely produced. So the Oracle is now refuted? Right? Well, no. There is a little problem...
- 22d. "...same fault as the poets...because of his success at his craft [*tékhnê*, art], thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits [*t'állà tà*

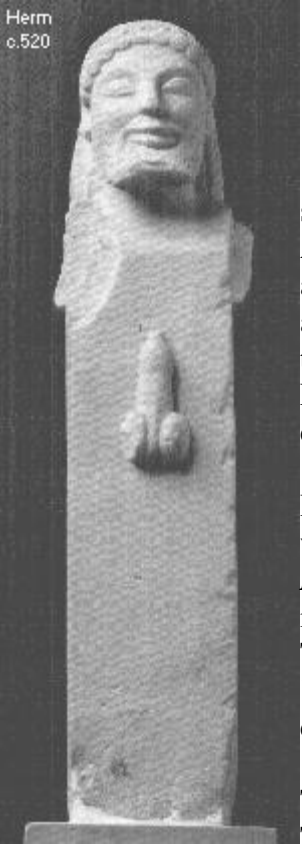
mégista, the other greatest (things)]..." Because the craftsmen were good at something, they thought, like the poets, that they knew about everything, which they didn't. "...this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had..." Wait a minute! This means that their wisdom isn't enough to refute the Oracle? How could that be? Socrates doesn't really explain just what the problem is. How does their lack of wisdom in other areas "overshadow" (*apokrýptô*, "hide from, conceal") their actual wisdom? The "other most important pursuits" must require a different and superior kind of wisdom. In fact, we have seen what this must be. To qualify as having *real wisdom*, and not just knowledge of this or that art, someone would have to know of the "human and social kind of excellence" -- "human and political virtue" -- *hê anthrôpinê te kai politiké areté*. The politicians had had the *reputation* for wisdom because this is what they were *supposed* to know. They didn't; but then Socrates gets down to the craftsmen, who do know something, but have neither the reputation nor the actual knowledge of "political virtue" either. If someone had this real wisdom, it would not be overshadowed by their ignorance if they did not know about handicrafts. But the wisdom of the craftsmen doesn't cut it when they are lacking and self-deceived about the more fundamental knowledge.

- 22e. "...neither their wisdom nor their ignorance..." Socrates doesn't have the craftsmen's knowledge of their craft (though he did know his own craft, unmentioned), but he does recognize his own ignorance of the human and social kind of excellence, which they don't. Since that recognition then is "human wisdom," "...the answer I gave myself and the oracle..." is that the answer of the Oracle stands and that it is better for Socrates to be "as I am."
- Misunderstandings
 - 23a. "...a reputation for wisdom, for in each case the bystanders thought that I myself possessed the wisdom that I proved that my interlocutor [Latin, *inter*, between, *loquor*, to speak] did not have." Socrates was doing something very unusual. He was taking things that people said and showing that they were incoherent, while at the same time he did not claim to have the right answers to any of the issues that came up. Since, as we know, everyone has an opinion, it was natural for people to think that Socrates must have opinions also, and must think that he had answers to the kinds of questions he asked. If he didn't give his answers in public, it was also natural that people might think he "taught" his answers privately, since that is what the Sophists and others actually did. Socrates probably had never tried to disabuse people of this impression before, and it is one of the very great misunderstandings about him that he must deal with in his defense. But it is not the only one. Seeing Socrates always ask questions and never give answers, there are other interpretations possible. Socrates made people look ridiculous. This is amusing and evidently drew crowds. This might suggest that maybe Socrates **didn't care** what the answers to his questions were. He just enjoyed getting a laugh out of

making others look foolish. Maybe he was actually ridiculing people's beliefs about the issues he dealt with -- the just and the unjust, right and wrong, good and evil, etc. -- and didn't really believe anything about those issues himself. In short, people could see Socrates as what now we call a **nihilist** (Latin *nihil* = nothing). This was a much more serious misunderstanding of Socrates; for, although he was certainly not a nihilist himself, there were young men (*néoi*, "youth") who hung out with him who actually *were* nihilists.

This is the point to discuss this problem, since Socrates will mention these young men shortly (23c), but he doesn't do a very good job of explaining why people are angry about them. They are the principal reason why Socrates is in trouble. They did bad things, and what they did damaged Socrates' reputation. He was thought to be their teacher. As Socrates later makes fairly clear (33b), his business was not to teach anyone anything. He did his questioning in public, and if anyone wanted to hang out and watch what he did, it was not his business to drive them away. Some young men, like Plato himself, had some notion of what Socrates was about, and that it was not just a game. Others, however, could take from Socrates what amused them and forget the rest. Then they would commit crimes, and people would ask, "How did he get to be like that?" Socrates must have "taught" him to commit those crimes.

Just about the most spectacular example of one of these young men was the celebrated **Alcibiades** (c.450-404). He was born to privilege; and after his father died in battle (447/6), he was raised by his famous uncle, the great leader of Athens, Pericles. He hung out with Socrates. Plato wrote an entire dialogue featuring him (the *Alcibiades*), which begins with Socrates homoerotically admiring the first blush of beard on his face. In the *Symposium*, however, Plato has Alcibiades stumbling into the party, drunk, telling a story of how he had gotten Socrates to sleep over once, trying to seduce him, only to have Socrates pay him no more sexual attention "than an elder brother" (212d-219d). Alcibiades would have come of age in about 429 but first came to political notice in about 420. At that point the war with Sparta appeared to be over. The "Ten Years" or "Archidamian" War, 431-421, had ended in the aftermath of the Athenians trapping and capturing a force of Spartans on the island of Sphacteria, near the Homeric city of Pylos, in 425. This was sensational, since the Spartans were always expected to fight to the death, as they had against the Persians at Thermopylae. The Peace however, was compromised by continued fighting, often because of plans by Alcibiades himself to organize opposition to Sparta. The



supreme opportunity came in 416, when Greek cities in Sicily appealed to Athens for help against Syracuse, the largest Greek city there, which was also an ally of Sparta. Alcibiades got himself elected general to lead an expedition against Syracuse, which would materially damage the Sparta cause and win the thanks of the other Sicilian Greeks (often called "Siciliots"). The older leader Nicias was also elected general to look after Alcibiades, since he already had a certain wild reputation...

In 415, the night before the expedition was supposed to leave for Sicily, someone went around and mutilated statues of the god Hermes that stood all over Athens. **Hermês** was the protector of, among other things, traffic, markets, and roads. His image was used in such locations, often at intersections, and to mark boundaries. Thus, there were a lot of these images. An individual statue is now called a "**Herm**"; and in the plural, the Latin form is used, "**Hermae**." The incident is called the "mutilation of the Hermae."

The Hermae now seem like very strange objects, archaic and peculiar. They were usually just a square stone pillar, with the head of Hermes at the top, and otherwise unadorned *except* for the *erect genitals* of Hermes at the appropriate location on the front of the pillar -- though the penis does not seem *entirely* erect in the example at right, since the (uncircumcised) foreskin still covers the glans. Today, of course, this would be regarded as funny or obscene. Not the kind of thing we see in public anymore. Indeed, after Christianity swept away this kind of stuff, it was forgotten that such things existed in the Classical world. It was brought back to modern attention when serious excavation began in 1748 at Pompeii, the Roman city buried by ash during the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 AD. To the embarrassment of the Catholic Bourbon King of the **Two Sicilies**, obscene objects, and not just the Hermae, began to be found. The auspicious genitals of Hermes had even been carved on people's doorjambs. Much of this material was tucked away in a special warehouse, the "Secret Museum," to which only serious, respectable adult males were allowed entry. Elsewhere in the world, however, the idea of divine genitals being sacred and lucky still survives. Although suppressed for a while

out of embarrassment of Western disapproval, such sights are beginning to revive somewhat in Japan, where colossal wooden phalluses can now be seen in religious processions. They are even being promoted as tourist attractions, drawing quite a few more foreign tourists than most other Japanese religious events. In pre-modern Japan, boundary stones in the shape of genitals, both male and female, were common.

The Athenians did not think that the mutilation of the Hermae was funny, or a virtuous suppression of obscenity; they thought it was a shocking and terrifying sacrilege. Hermes was there to protect the city, and if he was offended, then he could *withdraw* his protection. Nevertheless, no one knew quite what to do about it at the moment. So the expedition left for Sicily. As the days passed, however, suspicion grew that **Alcibiades** and his friends were just the kind of guys, without much respect for traditional religion, to have done this. It is not hard to imagine what happened. Young men, about to leave for war, get drunk, and in the wee hours decide to go looking for trouble -- like *Animal House* (1978). Someone gets the bright idea to mess with the familiar statues of Hermes, which they may already think are rather more funny than holy. The next day, they would just as soon forget about it, but it's too late. A warrant was sworn out for Alcibiades and a ship sent to Syracuse. On the way back, however, Alcibiades jumped ship. Flight to avoid prosecution. Desertion. Evidence of guilt in a charge of sacrilege. But then Alcibiades went even further. He went over to the Spartans. He advised them now to defeat the Athenian expedition in Sicily. The Athenian army and fleet were annihilated. Alcibiades was condemned to death *in absentia* and his property confiscated. When Sparta then reopened the main war with Athens, the "Decelean" or "Ionian" War of 413-404, Alcibiades advised the construction of a fleet to contest the sea with Athens and accompanied the ships to Ionia, which was the scene of much of the subsequent fighting.

Thus, Alcibiades can be credited with sacrilege, desertion, flight to avoid prosecution, and, last but not least, treason. So people would ask, "How did he get to be like that?" And



they might remember, "He used to hang out with Socrates. Indeed, they were very friendly, perhaps even lovers." So Socrates, a philosopher, who, as we all know, go around teaching their doctrines, must be responsible. If Alcibiades can be substantially blamed for the loss of the war against Sparta, then Socrates can ultimately be blamed also. So let's get him.

Alcibiades later began trying to play the Athenians, Spartans, and Persians off of each other. He got the Persians involved, ultimately to the benefit of Sparta, but he also helped the Athenians defeat a Spartan fleet in 410. This enabled him to return to Athens, with all forgiven, for a while. Things soured again with a defeat in 407, and Alcibiades again went into exile. Ironically, his place of exile in 405 was right by where the final battle, **Aegospotami**, was fought between Athens and Sparta. This historic location is the long peninsula along the straits, the ancient Hellespont and modern Dardanelles, that lead from the Aegean Sea into the Sea of Marmara, and so ultimately to Istanbul, the Bosphorus, and the Black Sea. The entire peninsula now takes its name from the Greek city of Kallipolis ("Beautiful City"). Part of Turkey today, the Turkish name is "Gelibolu," but elsewhere it is known by its name in Italian, **Gallipoli**. Such a place has a common Italian name because of the presence in the area of Italians, mainly from Venice, Pisa, and Genoa, during the Middle Ages. The name is best known, however, from the British landing there in 1915, during World War I. Winston Churchill, first Lord of the Admiralty at the time, hoped to seize the Straits and knock Turkey out of the war. It was a good idea but a miserable failure in execution, not unlike the Athenian Sicilian expedition. A 1981 movie *Gallipoli*, by Peter Weir, starring the later super-star Mel Gibson, details the Australian participation in the campaign.

In 405 both the Athenian and Spartan fleets came into the Straits. For some days they simply maneuvered around each other. In the evening, the fleets separated and the ships were drawn up on the beach for the evening. The ships, of course, were rowed -- galleys -- with shallow draft, though with some hundreds of men as a crew. Although 100 some feet long, such ships could be pulled up on the beach by their own crews. Watching this, Alcibiades walked down to the Athenian camp and warned them that the Spartans might attack as the Athenians were getting out of their ships. The Athenians famously told him to take a hike. The next day, sure enough, the Spartans followed the Athenian fleet and attacked as the men were getting out. The Athenian fleet was destroyed. The Spartans sailed directly to Athens, put the city under seige, and starved it into surrender in 404. The war was over.

Alcibiades, like the boy who cried "wolf," was simply no longer someone to believe, even when he was giving good advice. He fled to the Persians and was assassinated, in 404, with the agreement of both Athenians and Spartans.

- 23a. "...the god is wise..." The key to Socratic philosophy. The Presocratics and Sophists claimed a "wisdom more than human" because only the gods actually have such knowledge. "...his wisdom is worthless'." How "worthless" does Socrates really think his wisdom is? This is a problem for the "[Questions about Socrates](#)": Socrates does not *act* like he is entirely ignorant. No, after offering no definition of piety to [Euthyphro](#), he conducts himself in a way that he says is "good [*kalá*, beautiful] and just and pious" (35c). And he claims to know some things, like that the god cannot lie. These inconsistencies are addressed, of course, by Plato.
- 23b. "...continue this investigation as the god bade me... anyone, citizen or stranger..." Socrates continues to vindicate the Oracle by questioning people anywhere. He is not an armchair philosopher. He deals with what people say. These can be "citizen or stranger," which he says because of the large resident alien population of Athens. It was almost impossible for immigrants to become Athenian citizens, but the wealth and market of Athens attracted immigrants in much the same way that the United States

does. Since Socrates stops people in public places, there is a strong chance they will not be Athenians citizens.

Originally, someone was born an Athenian citizen if either parent was a native Athenian. However, Pericles married a woman who was not Athenian, and his political enemies, who could not harm him directly, realized that they could do so indirectly. They passed a law that **both** parents had to be Athenian citizens for someone to be born an Athenian. It was also retroactive. So Pericles' own children were suddenly no longer Athenians -- though this injustice didn't affect his two sons for long, since they, like their father, died of the plague.

Some argue that Athens wasn't really a **democracy** because women, aliens, and slaves didn't vote. The best response I've heard to that argument was from a fellow student, when I was a Freshman at the [University of New Mexico](#) in 1967. She said that Athens was a democracy "because they made up the word and called it that." To the Greeks themselves, the key point was that **the poor** were included in democratic government -- "every free adult male citizen" did not mean universal suffrage, but it was free of the property qualifications that were long characteristic of British and American democracy. Nevertheless, some people get so confused about this that it is possible to find them saying that Athens was not really a democracy because the poor were **not** included. Where that comes from is mysterious, especially when Thucydides says in *The Peloponnesian War* that **class war** often resulted in Greek cities, with the poor, partisans of Athens, fighting the wealthy partisans of Sparta. This is also the key to many traditional criticisms of both Greek and modern democracies: that when the poor discover that they can vote themselves money, the government will collapse into of war of everyone trying to steal from everyone else.

- 23c. "...the young men (*néoi*)...sons of the very rich..." Here Socrates addresses the issue of the "youth" who used to hang out with him, and whose misdeeds had become associated with him. He doesn't do a very good job, at least at this point in his defense. Notice that the word for youth, *nêos*, is very commonly taken to be the Greek word for "new," but its meaning is originally more like "young." It can *also* mean "new," but another word, *kaínos*, can be used for that.
- 23c. "...often imitate me and try to question others." Socrates acts like the only objection people have to his erstwhile followers is that they made

nuisances of themselves by questioning people the way Socrates did. This is a grave trivialization of the problem. As we saw above, things like sacrilege, desertion, and treason are more like what people were worried about. Socrates would not be seen as a possible enemy of Athens if all his friends had done was ask questions. But his friends going over to or collaborating with the Spartans -- that raises the issue of Socrates' own loyalty. He is not actually accused of treason, but the accusation of "corrupting the young" is definitely about something that is connected to such a serious charge.

- 23c. "...angry, not with themselves..." Socrates pursues the conceit that people are just angry about these young men asking questions. This is probably the least honest part of the *Apology* and perhaps might be considered evidence for the authenticity of Plato's rendition, since he might otherwise have been at pains to fix up the argument and address the real issue, treason, and not beat a straw man, as Socrates does.

A much more forthright and thorough treatment of all this is actually given by Xenophon, at *Memorabilia* II-12-48, where he addresses the case, not only of Alcibiades, but of Critias too, who actually went on to become one of the Thirty Tyrants. "Now, all the time that Critias and Alcibiades associated with Socrates they were out of sympathy with him," says Xenophon (II-39; Loeb trans. p.31). He thinks that they associated with Socrates just for their own ambitious purposes, hoping perhaps to acquire his own facility with argument -- "as soon as they thought themselves superior to their fellow-disciplines they sprang away from Socrates and took to politics" (II-16; Loeb trans. p.19). Interestingly, Xenophon details the vengeful steps that Critias took directly against Socrates under the oligarchy, while in the *Apology* Socrates never mentions that, even though he does talk about his problems with the Thirty (32c) and could win sympathy with a specific example of their hostility towards him. One suspects that Socrates had his own reasons for not mentioning Alcibiades or Critias by name, as considered below, at 23e.

- 23d. "...what he teaches to corrupt them..." People blame Socrates for making the young men the way they are, but then they can't say what he actually does teach to make them that way. This applies equally whether we are talking about the real crimes of people like Alcibiades or just about Socrates' trivialization, so it is a genuinely valuable part of his defense. "...they mention those accusations that are available against all philosophers..." So Socrates is thought of as a Presocratic and/or Sophist, and everything people believe about their teachings is attributed to him. Here the Presocratic line ("things in the sky") and the Sophist line ("the

worse argument stronger") is supplemented by the **atheist** line, "not believing in the gods." "...when they know nothing..." Perhaps they cannot answer the questions of Socrates or his imitators, but Socrates cannot deny that they know sacrilege and treason when they see them -- so he avoids talking about it.

- 23e. "...these people..." Now Socrates simply veers away from his treatment of the "youth" and begins to attack his accusers. The accusers may deserve the attack, but Socrates seems to change the subject a bit abruptly, as though he is uneasy with the issue. I think he is. He has evaded the real charge, trivialized the reason why he has been accused, and now moves away from it quickly. This uneasiness may reveal that Socrates has some real guilt and uncertainty about this. Here it compromises his defense, since he cannot forthrightly address the real actions of the "young men" he was friendly with.

Socrates could *feel* guilty about this without really *being* guilty. It is not uncommon for people to have friends who seem to them to be headed for trouble. It is always a difficult personal dilemma what, if anything, to say to the friend about what they are doing. Frank and forthright advice may be interpreted as hostile or intrusive. The friend may say, "Mind your own business," or "Up yours," and then go away. Or, one may decide to set an example rather than give advice, and hope that the friend will hang around and stay out of trouble that way. If the friend then gets in trouble anyway, the thought, "I should have said something" is hard to avoid, however little a difference saying something might have made. But Socrates is in a more difficult position than most people. If his behavior in the *Euthyphro* is characteristic, and it is certainly consistent with his "knowing practically nothing" stand of Socratic Ignorance, then the problem is that **Socrates does not tell people what to do**. All he does is ask questions, and at some point, however obvious the conclusion, the interlocutor has to supply the final answer himself.

Socrates, it seems, is not alone in history in this respect. Thomas Jefferson tells us, in a letter to a grandson, on November 24, 1808:

Conviction is the effect of our own
dispassionate reasoning, either in solitude,
or weighing within ourselves,
dispassionately, what we hear from others,
standing uncommitted in argument
ourselves. It was one of the rules which,

above all others, made **Doctor Franklin** the most amiable of men in society, "never to contradict anybody." If he was urged to announce an opinion, he did rather by asking questions, as if for information, or by suggesting doubts.

Socrates, like Franklin on this description, never sets out to impose his opinion. He does not think that his opinions even have the status of being *worthy* of imposition. But this also puts him at a disadvantage. All he can do to straighten out someone like Alcibiades is ask friendly questions. Now that he is in trouble because of what people like Alcibiades did, he is ill at ease. It is a bit awkward to explain that he might have given advice by asking his questions, indirectly, but it seems to him later (33b) better just to say that he was never anyone's teacher, never taught them anything, and is not responsible for whatever they did. In the present passage, however, he doesn't seem quite up to facing even that defense. He avoids the issue. Perhaps in bad conscience and feeling guilty, but without any real guilt or responsibility. Just the uneasiness over people he saw go bad, but about whom he could do less than even an ordinary friend might have done.

Xenophon, who often writes (in retrospect) as though Socrates had all sorts of direct advice to give people, nevertheless admits, "To be sure he never professed to teach this; but, by letting his own light shine, he led his disciples to hope that they through imitation of him would attain to such excellence" (*Memorabilia* II-3-4; Loeb p.14-15). Socrates never sought anything more than friendship -- "his highest reward would be the gain of a good friend" (II-7; Loeb p.15) -- and no one could expect to be taught by him -- "Socrates indeed never promised any such boon to anyone" (II-8; Loeb p.15) - - except by **example** and by **questioning**. What we don't see in Xenophon is the ironic playfulness with which Socrates undertakes to become the "pupil" of someone like Euthyphro. Closer associates, indeed, would be little inclined to put on the airs that Socrates has no difficulty eliciting from him.

- 24a. "...I have hidden or disguised nothing." In fact, he has just finishing hiding and disguising perhaps the key issue in the charges against him. The charges are still not fair, and he might simply have handled the issue better, but it is the most awkward and hollow part in Socrates' entire defense. Not the best note on which to end his examination of his reputation. He reputation, indeed, as a teacher of traitors, has not been openly addressed at all.
 - New Accusations
 - 24b. "Let this suffice...earlier accusers.... defend myself against Meletus..." Having addressed "the earlier accusers" of those who have generated and spread the kind of reputation he has, Socrates now moves to the real charges against him at the moment, and one of his real accusers, Meletus. Socrates never does bother with his other accusers, Anytus and Lycon.
 - 24b. "Meletus, that good and patriotic man, as he says he is..." Both sarcasm, since Socrates really doesn't think that Meletus is a "good and patriotic man," and the warning qualification "as he says he is..." Here again, Socrates doesn't always just *say* things in an ironic way but he warns us with a qualifying statement. It is Meletus, not Socrates, who says this about Meletus.
 - 24b. "Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spritual things..." We finally get the statement of the actual charges. The first part, about the young, Socrates has already touched on and will deal with first in his examination of Meletus. Then he will move to the second part and try to clarify what the accusation is. Clarification is necessary, not only in Greek, but especially in English, where the translation can create problems.

Socrates is accused of not believing in the "the gods in whom the city believes" but in *hétera daimónia kainá*. Now, *daimónia kainá* is translated as "new spiritual beings" by Harold North Fowler in the Loeb Classical Library edition (Harvard, 1914-1966, p.91), "new spiritual things" by W.H.D. Rouse (*Great Dialogues of Plato*, Mentor, 1956, p.430), and "new divinities" by G.M.A. Grube (*Plato, Five Dialogues*, 1981, 1986, p.31). Grube's original translation was thought better of and is now rendered "new spiritual things," like Rouse, in recent editions (p.29), which, however, are not dated, unless the isolated number "95" on the copyright page is evidence of the date (and we are not warned that the translation has been altered). The problem all these translation are dealing with is that **there is no noun** in the Greek phrase. *Kainá* is "new"; and *daimónia* is "of or belonging to a *daímôn*," where a *daímôn* is a god, spirit, or even soul -- though this is later the word "demon" used by Christianity. So the literal translation would be that Socrates believes in "other new spiritual." But this is not *grammatical* in English, as it is in Greek, since English requires a noun, not just adjectives, in that phrase. We do know something from the Greek phrase about what a noun would have to

be like, since all three adjectives in the phrase are **neuter plurals** - - "things." Supplying the noun "divinities" or "beings" implies that what Socrates' teaching is about living things, or actual gods. This adds far too much to what the charge says, and makes Socrates' questions about it sound unmotivated. "Things" is the best noun to supply, a very indefinite, semantically neuter, plural. But it should be remembered that even this is more definite than the original Greek. Socrates is being accused of teaching new something-or-others about divine or spiritual things, without much of a clue about what those would be. No wonder that Socrates is going to ask about it.

○ Examination of Meletus

▪ 24c-25c. First Line of Questioning, Education of Youth

- 24c. "Meletus is guilty... of professing to be seriously concerned with things about none of which he has ever cared." Socrates' examination on the first charge is directed to showing that Meletus doesn't have any ideas about education and so really hasn't thought about it. If so, he is in no position to know whether Socrates has a beneficial teaching or not. Of course, Socrates doesn't have *any* teaching, so this is all besides the point anyway, but it should serve to impeach and discredit Meletus.

The following exchange is the only time that someone besides Socrates speaks in the *Apology*, and it is the only example we have in this work of Socrates' method of asking questions. Grube's text is not set up like a dialogue, with separate identified lines for each speaker. Meletus' answers are simply set off with a dash.

- 24d. "Surely you consider it of the greatest importance that our young men be as good as possible? -- Indeed I do." Socrates always starts with an innocent-sounding question. There is hardly another answer that Meletus could give here, but what it does is establish that Meletus has brought this prosecution about something that he thinks is of great importance, so presumably something that he is concerned about and devoted some attention to.
- 24d. "...tell the jury who improves them." This also seems like an innocent enough inquiry, but Meletus actually doesn't have an answer ready and at first doesn't say anything. "...you are silent and know not what to say..." After more prodding, he finally says, "The laws."
- 24e. Such an answer is not responsive, since Socrates asked "who?" After pointing this out, Socrates gets Meletus to answer

"These jurymen." While Meletus sounds innocent of any understanding of Socrates, he is clever enough to know how to appeal to the jury. If Socrates questions the role or ability of the jury in improving the young, then he will be insulting the jury. Of course, such a consideration will not even slow him down. But he takes a slightly different tack. "All of them, or some but not others? -- All of them." It is not just that the jurymen are able to "educate the young and improve them," but that every one of them, without exception, is able to do so. "...a great abundance of benefactors." A bit of sarcasm.

- 25a. "...what about the audience? ... -- They improve them." If the jury was so rich with teachers, Socrates decides to check about the audience. How many are in the audience, and whether it includes women, is not known. But it turns out that the audience members are all good educators too.
- 25a. "...the members of the Council? -- The Councillors also."

The "Council" is the *boulé*, and the "members of the Council" are the *bouleutai*. The **Council of the Five Hundred** was created by the democratic reformer Cleisthenes, with members ultimately chosen by lot from each *deme*, the thirty smallest divisions of the population of Athens (from *dêmos*, a district or the people who live in it, or just "the people"). The Council was effectively the day to day government of Athens and determined what laws to propose to the Assembly. The Council itself was divided into ten parts, corresponding to the ten Tribes (*Phylai*) of Athens. Each of these ten parts *presided* for a tenth of the year, and the presiding Councillors were called the *Prýtaneis* or presidents. Socrates mentions being a *Prýtanis* below, 32b.

- 25a. "...but what about the assembly [*ekklêsía*]? ... -- They improve them." The Assembly means every free adult male citizen of Athens, if they were all to show up; so this is a significant part of the entire population of the city, in fact everyone of political significance, everyone with the franchise, which is why Socrates next refers to them as "all the Athenians" (*pántes Athênaiói*).
- 25a. "...I alone corrupt them... -- That is most definitely what I mean." So, it turns out, Meletus thinks that Socrates is the only bad influence in Athens. He might not want to accuse others, or this could stir up far too much animosity, turning it into a political contest rather than just a trial, and Meletus might get sued for libel. No, better keep it simple. Socrates is the only corrupt influence in the city.

- 25b. "Does this also apply to horses do you think?" Socrates how moves his argument to one of his barnyard analogies. "...one individual is able to improve them, or every few... whereas the majority... corrupt them?" In having or teaching specialized knowledge, whether about animals or humans, Socrates now asks if this is something everyone has, or just one or a few. Of course, on the analogy, the answer must be only a few; and Meletus knows this, so he doesn't even give an answer. "Of course it is, whether you and Anytus say so or not." Socrates answers his own question. Meletus doesn't know who improves the youth, so he has simply said everyone, excepting only the person he wants to condemn. In the *Meno*, Anytus also wanted to say that "any Athenian gentleman" (92e) could teach virtue, but he also excepted all the Sophists (91c). If Meletus got into that here, then he would be open to questions about whether he thought Socrates was a Sophist, how Socrates would be a Sophist, and so to admission that what Socrates does has little to do with the Sophists. Instead, Meletus just shuts up.

In answering his own question, which he also does elsewhere in Plato's dialogues, especially with other uncooperative subjects (e.g. the *Gorgias*), Socrates opens himself to the charge that he has opinions about his questions after all, and is not just asking his questions to vindicate the god, on the principle that everyone is ignorant. This bears keeping in mind as a [Question about Socrates](#), but Meletus is too slow to pick up on it here and belabor Socrates with the inconsistency.

- 25c. "...you have never had any concern for our youth..." So Meletus, far from treating education as "of the greatest importance," can't answer the simplest question about who actually are the most effective teachers of the youth. He has "given no thought" to the subject about which he is accusing Socrates. All he knows is that he doesn't like Socrates.
- 25c-26a. Second Line of Questioning, Corrupting the Young
 - 25c. "...tell us also whether it is better for a man to live among good or wicked fellow citizens." The second line of questioning opens with another innocent question. Meletus has already been burned, so now he doesn't even want to answer this question. "Do not the wicked to some harm...? -- Certainty." Finally Meletus answers.

This whole line of questioning is going to turn on one of Socrates' pet ideas, namely that **No one**

knowingly does wrong. Although Socrates does occasionally give answers to his own questions, he does not do so in a systematic or complete way, which means he is consistent enough in his Ignorance not to have theories about the good, etc. But in the course of his investigation he does come up with some theories, more about knowledge than about the content of ethics. This is one of the more characteristic ones and seems just as peculiar today as it would have back then, since we tend to think that only the incompetent, children or the insane or senile, don't know that they are doing wrong when they are doing it. That is what they can be punished for. Here, Socrates wants to get Meletus to apply this principle to **him** and to admit that Socrates could not have knowingly corrupted the young, that it wouldn't make any sense.

- 25c. "Does the man exist who would rather be harmed...?" Meletus is reluctant to answer again, and Socrates must mention "...the law orders you to answer." Finally, we get the reply, "Of course not."
- 25d. "Do you accuse me here of corrupting the young... deliberately...? -- Deliberately." Does Socrates deliberately made his associates wicked, when they are going to then harm him? When Meletus answers yes, then the conclusion follows that such a person knows that he will be harmed, which seems foolish and senseless. Perhaps realizing that, this is the last answer the Meletus gives in the line of questioning.
- 25d-26a. "...are you so much wiser....but I have reached such a pitch of ignorance that I do not realize this...if I make one of my associates wicked I run the risk of being harmed by him..." Socrates draws the conclusion, putting it in the form of a question. Meletus is clearly a reluctant and hostile witness, so Socrates has to make the answer as obvious as possible. He is not going to get an answer out of Meletus. "...I do not think anyone else will..." While Meletus may know that he doesn't like the point, he is certainly unaware of Socrates' theory that is behind it. He is even more unlikely to understand or accept that, and the jury too. "Either I do not corrupt the young or, if I do, it is unwillingly..." Whether compelled by the argument or not, neither Meletus nor the jury is going to credit the conclusion.
- 26a. "...to instruct them and exhort them; for clearly, if I learn better, I shall cease to do what I am doing unwillingly." If Socrates has accidentally corrupted the young, then he doesn't belong in a lawcourt. Instead, Meletus should have just tried to straighten him out. "...you have avoided my company..." But Meletus was never

interested in tangling with Socrates. "...punishment, not of instruction..." If no one knowingly does wrong, then, actually, no one would belong in the lawcourt and no one would be in need of punishment.

If no one knowingly does wrong, then, as Socrates say, "**if I learn better**," he will cease doing wrong. The idea that knowledge of the good would produce goodness is the principle that **virtue is knowledge**, i.e. to be virtuous, one must acquire the right knowledge, presumably the knowledge of the "human and social kind of excellence." Furthermore, if virtue is knowledge, then presumably it can be taught. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates argues about this with the great Sophist himself, with, in typical fashion, Socrates arguing against the thesis at the beginning and for it at the end. The *Meno* begins with the explicit question about whether virtue can be taught (providing an actual argument along the way that no one knowingly desires bad things, 77b-78b). The answer seems to be "ordinarily not," but then it turns out that this is only because everyone is ignorant and because real knowledge must be remembered, not taught -- Plato's theory of Recollection. In the *Republic*, Plato modifies this with his theory that the right part of the soul, reason, must be dominant both for knowledge to be obtained and for it to have its salutary effect. In the *Apology* one peculiarity is that, even as Socrates tries to get Meletus to admit that he would not knowingly do wrong, Socrates *never* concedes to his *accusers* the benefit of this principle. Jesus may have said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), but Socrates does not. This kind of inconsistency should make it clear that Socrates is not a **systematic thinker**. Even his own pet ideas are not applied consistently, and when it comes to his accusers, he is quite happy to appeal to ordinary ideas about intention, responsibility, and blame.

This same kind of inconsistency occurs a bit more recently. When "progressive" thought about crime became dominant in the 60's, with a social and psychological

determinism that excused violent criminals as helpless victims of society, racism, capitalism, etc., this excuse was nevertheless almost never conceded to those whose crimes were less politically favored, i.e. the deeds of Southern Rednecks, or those who were guilty of no crimes at all except the Marxist offense of being capitalists, i.e. executives of corporations. This double standard persists today, when crimes by politically favored groups may be "understood" as resulting from righteous "anger," while crimes by politically disfavored groups are incomprehensible manifestations of "hate." Socrates would have had a job cut out for him, asking questions about this sort of thing, even though he commits the inconsistency in his own defense.

- 26b. "Meletus has never been at all concerned with these matters." The point is the same as at the end of the first line of questioning, though the first demonstrated that Meletus hadn't thought about education *at all*, while the second merely demonstrates that Meletus is not familiar with Socrates' own paradoxical theories about moral knowledge. In all fairness, he can hardly be expected to be thus familiar, or to accept them.

But a much cleverer Meletus could have answered Socrates' argument. What often happens in life is that the wicked corrupt others in the expectation that the wickedness will never rebound upon them. This may be foolish, and so senseless and impossible to someone like Socrates, but it is a common phenomenon. Thus, in Spike Lee's movie *Malcolm X* (1992), Malcolm himself, with a perfectly honest job, is corrupted by a Boston gangster and taught the ways of crime. Malcolm, as Socrates would predict, begins chiselling the gangster, raking off some of the profits that he should turn in. The gangster does not just reflect philosophically, "One I have made wicked is now harming me"; he intends to kill Malcolm, who gets

away through a bathroom window and escapes to New York.

- 26b-25c. Third Line of Questioning, the Gods
 - 26b. "...by teaching them not to believe in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things. Is this not what you say I teach...? -- ...most certainty..." The next, and final, line of questions involves the next charge in the indictment, about belief in the gods and whatever other sort of spiritual teaching Socrates has.

"The gods in whom the city believes" is an important phrase. Reading about Greek mythology may give people the impression that there was a unified Greek national religion. Nothing of the sort ever existed. Each Greek city essentially had its own state religion, with its own particular gods. Even gods with the same name in different locations may nevertheless be represented differently. Traditional and archaic cult statues, like the surviving one of the **Artemis of Ephesus**, laden with breasts or testicles or something, may look very strange compared to the humanistic images produced by later Greek art. The main gods at Athens were Athena, after whom the city was named, and Poseidon, who had a conspicuous temple on the height at Cape Sunion, the tip of the peninsula of Attica. Even the Acropolis, however, had more than one Athena -- **Athena Parthenos**, "Athena the Virgin," in the **Parthenon** and another one in the **Temple of Athena Nike**, "Athena of Victory." In time, some sites, like Olympia and Delphi, gained the reputation as representing Greek religion as a whole, but this was a very incomplete and non-institutional organization.

The particularity of the institutions of Greek cities extended to matters that now are taken for granted as universal. Thus, each city had its own calendar and even its own alphabet. All the calendars used lunar months, often with the same names; but which name went with which months, and how extra months were added to reconcile the seasons

with the moon, was a local matter and often subject to political controversy. Aristophanes joked that if the gods regulated their lives by the civic calendars, they would often go to bed without their supper. Greek alphabets belonged to two broad families, the "blue," characteristic of Ionia and central Greece, and the "red" alphabets, characteristic of western and northern Greece, and of the Doric fringe of islands through Crete and Rhodes. A feature of the red alphabets is that they used the symbol **X** to write the letter *ksi*, while the blue alphabets used the same symbol to write the letter *khi*. The blue alphabet of Ionia later became the standard Greek alphabet. A red alphabet, however, was the one borrowed to write Etruscan and later Latin. The Greek language itself, of course, was also divided into several [dialects](#). Athens had its own dialect, "Attic" Greek, which was basically Ionic but with some Doric influence. For instance, the Greek word for "day" was *êmérê* in Ionic, *haméra* in Doric, and *hêméra* in Attic. With some modifications, Attic became the basis for the later *koiné* or "common" Greek used in the Hellenistic period, and in the New Testament.

- 26c. "I cannot be sure..." Since the phrase *daimónia kainá* leaves it so vague about what Socrates is supposed to have been teaching, he now wants to clarify the matter. So he asks Meletus whether he is accused of believing in some gods, just not the gods of the city, or in no gods at all (*átheos*, "godless"). Meletus answers, "...you do not believe in gods at all."
- 26c. "...strange fellow..." Actually, Socrates says, "Oh amazing (*thaumásios*) Meletus..." Although the charge was ambiguous, Socrates finds it hard to believe that Meletus is really going to go ahead and say this, despite the difficulty that he is sure to have maintaining it in the face of the words of his own accusation.

- 26d. "Do I not believe... that the sun and moon are gods? -- No, by Zeus, jurymen, for he says that the sun is stone, and the moon earth." A very, very revealing passage, both about Socrates and about Meletus. Socrates does not share in the naturalism of the Presocrates. He still has the conservative religious belief that celestial objects are divine. Meletus doesn't know that and, as Socrates has said, simply attributes to Socrates the kind of things that "other philosophers" would believe.
- 26d. "...books of Anaxagoras of Clazomenae..." It was Anaxagoras who specifically said that the sun was a hot stone and the moon was made of earth. One out of two isn't bad, for the 5th century B.C., since the moon is made out of the same minerals (feldspars, etc.) as the earth. This statement by Socrates shows us that he is *familiar* with Presocratic doctrine, even if he doesn't believe it. Indeed, Socrates says elsewhere that he read a book by Anaxagoras once because he had heard that Mind (*noûs*) was the cause of everything. Unfortunately, the role of Mind was perfunctory, and Socrates was disappointed.
- 26e. "...a drachma at most in the bookshops..." A fairly startling revelation of Greek prices. A philosophy book might be purchased for a drachma. As we have [seen](#), this would come to just about \$15 in 1990 dollars, not all that much even today for a book, when bestselling hardbacks are in the \$25 to \$40 range, and textbooks can easily run from \$50 to \$100.

In 1970 I paid \$40 for an Arabic dictionary, when a drachma in 1967 dollars would be more like \$3.33. The inexpensive nature of a Greek book is rather surprising when we consider that the printing press was not invented for many centuries, and a book by Anaxagoras means a **hand copied** manuscript. Perhaps the price was so reasonable because the demand was not so great. There may not have been a mass market for Greek philosophy even in Greece; for, after all, Anaxagoras was driven out of Athens with the same kinds of charges leveled against Socrates (though this was mainly as an indirect political attack on Anaxagoras' friend, the statesman Pericles). He can't have been too popular. Of course, we tend to think of hand copied books as so valuable because literacy was so restricted in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, when copies might be made merely to replace a worn or worm-eaten original, and when such copies would be embellished, "illuminated," with color illustrations or gold leaf. That is not how publishing

worked in the Classical world. Few manuscripts from that period survive (mainly from Egypt), but they were produced in a very utilitarian way. A fair number might have been produced for a real, if limited, market, especially during the Roman period. Since literacy was supposed to have been rather high in Athens, we are faced with the fact that pretty much anyone with an interest in "advanced" knowledge in the 5th century would have had access to it.

- 26e. "...especially as they are so absurd..." The final reminder that Socrates does not accept these Presocratic cosmological theories.
- 26e. "...you do not believe in the gods and all." And a reminder that Meletus sees Socrates as as much an atheist as he thinks of all the other philosophers and Sophists.
- 26e. "...cannot be believed...even...by yourself. ...insolent and uncontrolled." Socrates takes a moment to express his astonishment, which is considerable, that Meletus would try and make this stick. The charge is like a "riddle" or a joke, since Meletus must now reconcile the charge of atheism with his very own accusation, which is going to imply that Socrates **does** believe in gods, as the subsequent examination will reveal.
- 26a-27b. Now we get the most merciless cross-examination from Socrates. "...how we appears to contradict himself..." This makes explicit the goal of all Socratic examination, to expose a contradiction. "...you, Meletus, answer us...disturbance...proceed in my usual manner." We are reminded again that Meletus doesn't want to answer Socrates' questions and that the jury is restless with this procedure. They probably did not expect that his "usual [/customary] manner" was going to be so like himself and so little like the familiar courtroom.
- 27b. "Does any man, Meletus, believe in human activities who does not believe in humans?" The entire line of questioning here is going to be based on the principle that the existence and use of an adjective implies that there are nouns, and so things, that have the attributes of the adjective. First Socrates asks if anyone (*anthrṓpōn*, "of men") believes in *anthrṓpeia prágmata*, "human affairs," who does not also believe in *anthrṓpoi*, "men" or "humans." Here the Grube translation has been altered recently, with "activities" replacing "affairs" and with "humans" replacing "human beings," perhaps because no word corresponds to "beings" in Greek, and because "men" would have been politically **incorrect**. *Prágmata* could mean either "deeds" or "affairs." "Affairs" is more like the modern meaning of derived words like "pragmatic," while "deeds" or "activities" may be more to the point

for Socrates' argument. There have been extensive alterations of Grube's translation in the following passages, not all of them necessary or felicitous. The earlier translation will often be given in brackets.

- 27b. "...make him answer, and not again and again create a disturbance." Meletus doesn't answer, but the jury is causing trouble. Socrates is perfectly willing to stand up to them and tell them what's what. "...horses....horsemen's activities [*or* equine affairs]... flute-playing activities [flute music] but not in flute-players?" Two more sets of adjectives and nouns, but still no answer from Meletus.
- 27b. "No, my good sir..." Actually, Socrates says, "Oh best (*áristos*) of men," with ironic exaggeration of Meletus' value. "no man could..." Actually, to the question, "Is there any man," Socrates answers "there is not (*ouk éstin*)." "...I will tell you and the jury." Actually, "you and these others." Again, *nota bene*, Meletus won't answer, so Socrates answers for him.
- 27c. "Does any man believe in spiritual activities (*daimónia prágmata*) who does not believe in spirits (*daímones*)?" Strangely enough, Meletus actually answers, "No one" -- though again the question and the answer are really "Is there a man..." and "There is not." This destroys Meletus' accusation. Now he must admit that Socrates believes in *daímones*, and it cannot be avoided, for Greek religion, that this will imply gods also.
- 27c. "Thank you..." Socrates thanks Meletus for obeying the jury to answer, but then he rubs it in by going over the point again. While Meletus has responded that there is not a man who believes in spiritual [things] without believing in spirits, when Socrates asks the same question with himself as the subject, Meletus won't answer again. So, again, Socrates answers for him, "I shall assume that you agree..."
- 27c-d. "...spirits to be either gods or the children of gods?" Now that Socrates has established his belief in spirits, then he asks what spirits are. His suggestion is that they are either gods or the children of gods, which is not necessarily how we use the word now, but Meletus actually agrees with this, "Of course (*pánu ge*)." These are actually the last words spoken, and the last answer given, by Meletus in the *Apology*.
- 27d. "...since I do believe in spirits, as you admit, if spirits are gods... you speak in riddles and in jest..." Socrates draws the obvious conclusion. "Spiritual" things imply spirits and, based on Meletus' own belief, spirits imply gods -- or the children of gods. But then children of the gods imply gods also.
- 27d. "...bastard children of the gods by nymphs or some other mothers, as they are said to be..." A red flag in the world of Socrates' discourse. He distances himself from the idea of bastards

of the gods with the key qualification, "as they are **said** to be." **Socrates** is not saying it. As with his other careful qualifications, this is a clue that he *doesn't* believe that there are bastard children of the gods. That would be immoral; and to Socrates the gods are not immoral. He has already mentioned this to **Euthyphro** and is also aware that this constitutes an innovation in religion, for which he might very well be criticized. In fact, it does not become an issue in the *Apology*, since his accusers think that he is an atheist and are probably unaware that his criticism of their religion is more moralistic than atheistic.

- 27e. "...the young of horses and asses..." If Socrates believed there were children of the gods but then did not believe in the gods, this would be as absurd as to say, with one of his barnyard analogies again, that **mules** exist but not horses and asses. Although apt, the analogy seems a little unfortunate. Which are the horses and which are the asses? Comparing the gods to asses may not convey quite the right tone of reverence to the jury that Socrates would like.
- 27e. "...either to test us or because you were at a loss to find any true wrongdoing..." Meletus, of course, would not ironically engage in the Socratic project of testing Socrates. On the other hand, Socrates has quite convincingly shown that Meletus has simply attributed to Socrates what he thinks "all philosophers" believe, as Socrates said about his reputation in the first part of the *Apology*.
- 27e-28a. "...one and the same man to believe in spritual but not also in divine things, and then again for that same man to believe neither in spirits nor in gods nor in heroes." Socrates sums up his argument. This is an extensively rewritten passage in the recent edition. Grube's original translation goes, "...one and the same man to believe in the activities of divine beings and gods, and then again the part of one and the same man not to believe in the existence of divinities and gods and heroes." Neither translation shows quite what Socrates says, since the first phrase has only the neuter plural adjectivies (*daimónia*, "spiritual," and *theîa*, "godly, divine") and the second phrase the plural nouns (*daímones* and *theoí*, "gods"). This reflects the structure of the original argument. The words "things," "activities," and "existence" do not exist in the Greek text. The newer translation tries to reduce the supplied nouns to a minimum, both in number and semantically ("things").
- 28a. "...prolonged defense..." Socrates has finished examining Meletus and, in a sense, his defense is over. He is no longer going to talk about the charges but instead reflect on his situation. "...unpopular...slanders and envy of many people." In other words, Socrates still expects to be convicted because of his reputation, regardless of his success in dealing with Meletus. If he were really worried about the present charges and accusers, he could proceed to examine Anytus and Lycon, but he doesn't.

Later (36b) he jokes that he might have gotten more votes, and even won the case, if he had cross-examined them also. Indeed. But perhaps, we are reminded, he doesn't want to win the case at all.

o Death

- 28b. "...ashamed...danger of death.." Socrates now turns to the peril of death that he is in, since his accusers have already let it be known that they want the death penalty for him. One might think that this is not the time to talk about this. After he has been convicted, and the jury will be voting on death or not, then he might consider his attitude towards death. But to do it now, is this really relevant to the charges? Is this really going to help? Of course not. Socrates is already telling the jury that he doesn't care if they kill him.
- 28b. "...right or wrong... acting like a good or a bad man." Socrates doesn't ask himself about life or death, just about right and wrong, good and bad. A question many do not ask themselves -- like *judges* who sentence people, even sick people, under outrageous mandatory minimums for non-violent, victimless drug "offenses," knowing that they themselves thereby do wrong, commit grave injustices, and act like bad men. But, they reflect, they "have no choice." Trying to be good judges, they just end up being good Germans, evidently unaware that *blind obedience* is not what created America. A judge does have a choice. If he refuses to participate in injustice, he will at worst be reversed, censured, or lose his job. Since he is certainly a lawyer already, he can just go back to a law practice. But when he has "no choice" but to participate in injustice, the result is that the innocent have their lives destroyed, are assaulted in some hell-hole prison, and are lost as the support of their families. Rather than being men of conscience and honor, in the best traditions of America, the judges accept being instruments of evil and injustice.
- Battle
 - 28c. "...all the heroes who died at Troy..." Not many times in the history of philosophy has the position of philosophers been compared to that of warriors in battle. Socrates can do this because (1) he actually was in battle, as he will shortly note, and (2) he actually is in danger of death, with the clearly stated intentions of his accusers in the air. His "investigation" for the god, at first just a pious and friendly inquiry, has now become war.
 - 28c. "...the son of Thetis..." This, of course, was Achilles, the greatest Greek hero of the *Iliad*. In this passage, two things are happening. (1) Socrates produces a paragon of fearlessness in the face of death; and (2) Socrates is overlooking the moral ambivalence of myth in order to cite this paragon. Achilles was certainly "contemptuous of danger" in just the way Socrates means (with the help of being nearly invulnerable to harm), but he doesn't quite pass the test Socrates has just mentioned, about the important question of whether one is a good or a bad man. Achilles was not entirely a good man, did not necessarily do the right thing; but in

thinking of him as good, noble, and righteous, Socrates pursues his project of morally cleaning up Greek religion and breaking away from the [fifth characteristic](#) of mythopoetic thought. Achilles must be seen very selectively to do this.

Achilles seems to be a far less admirable character than the Trojan hero, Hector, whom Achilles slays at the climax of the epic. We see Hector lovingly interacting with his wife and infant son, but the whole *Iliad* begins with Achilles storming off in a pique after he is deprived of a female prisoner whom he has been enjoying -- i.e. raping. This may sound like good [Nietzschean](#) morality, but in actual practice, this kind of thing is pretty nasty stuff.

It is precisely Hector's role as husband and father, depicted in his devotion to Andromache and their son, that established his image as the premier defender of a peaceful civilization. This role assured him moral superiority over Achilles, who fought only to secure revenge and personal glory. [F. Carolyn Graglia, *Domestic Tranquility, A Brief Against [Feminism](#)*, Spence Publishing Company, Dallas, 1998, p.231]

Homer says, "I sing the wrath of Achilles," and the whole *Iliad*, indeed, is about just what happens when Achilles gets angry. First of all, he goes to sulk in his tent and doesn't fight anymore. Without him, things do not go well for the Greeks, and the Trojans are even breaking into the Greek camp. Achilles simply gets ready to leave. But then his best friend, Patroclus, asks if he can borrow Achilles' armor, to make the Trojans think that Achilles has returned to the battle. Achilles loans the armor. But the Trojan hero, Hector, is not fooled, fights, and kills Patroclus, stripping off the armor. When the body of Patroclus is brought back to Achilles, does he blame himself? Is there any *mea culpa*? No, Achilles is not the kind of guy who will blame himself for anything. It is all Hector's fault. So Achilles has some new divine armor made,

and goes after Hector, who has simply been defending his country against invaders. Even the king of the gods, Zeus, who has more or less been planning all this, is unhappy that maybe the better man will lose; but he holds up a curious pair of scales, and the fate of Hector "sinks down to Hades." When Achilles kills Hector, he even insults and mutilates the body. With the help of the gods, Hector's father Priam has to beg for Hector's remains, and Achilles finally relents. The *Iliad* ends with the funerals.

One might ask, "What was all that *for*?" The *Iliad* doesn't seem to be about the Trojan War, just one incident. Nothing about Achilles' Heel or the Trojan Horse is in it. Indeed, the *Iliad* is just about one thing, how Achilles became immortally famous, by killing Hector. We know that he will die because of that, since he was prophesied to either live long and obscure or die famous and young. And we know that he can only be killed by his heel, since his goddess mother Thetis was holding him there when she dipped him as an infant into the River Styx, the boundary of the Underworld. But none of those details are in the *Iliad*.

Later readers of the *Iliad* have often sympathized much more with the Trojans than with the quarrelsome, underhanded Greeks. Roman readers of the *Iliad* did not hesitate to imagine themselves descendants of the Trojans -- as in Virgil's *Aeneid*, where the Prince Aeneas, saved from Troy by his mother Aphrodite, travels to Italy and, anticipating Romulus, founds the Roman nation. There is also a school in Southern California, the arch-rival of the [University of California at Los Angeles](#), where the student body is named after the warriors of Troy. All this testifies to the [moral ambivalence](#) of the mythic story. It is especially striking because, as the saying goes, history is written by the winners, but the Greeks, who won at Troy, ended up writing a history rather unflattering to themselves, not to mention rather unflattering to the gods also. Such ambivalence, so authentic and truthful to life, is the very thing that Socrates, and some earlier philosophers, wanted to fix up. Perfectly good gods,

however, consequently lost most of their personality, and the later perfectly good God, Creator of Everything, was then saddled with *allowing* the evil that existed elsewhere.

- 28c. "...avenge...Patroclus, and you kill Hector, you will die yourself..." Socrates quotes Thetis and refers to the details of the story given above.
- 28d. "...given the wrongdoer his deserts..." Achilles, of course sees Hector as the "wrongdoer" and cannot imagine that his own tantrum, over losing the girl he enjoyed raping, is the principal cause of the events.
- 28d. "...taken a position that he believes to be best, or has been placed by his commander..." Socrates has staked his life on what he thinks is best. This makes it sound like he is pretty sure, but he never does give us the kinds of definitions, explanations, or justifications of his own values that he was always demanding from others. Also, although this makes Socrates a very autonomous agent, we see exceptions to this. On the analogy of battle, Socrates is bound to obey his commanders, about real ones he will shortly remind us. In practicing philosophy, his commander is the god, whose business he is about. However, his autonomy is preserved in his relation to the god because he will not believe anything about the god unless it conforms to his own ideas about what is good and right. Since the god never did give him any direct instructions, this can be rather conveniently maintained. The implied heteronomy, however, concealed in the *Apology*, comes out rather forcefully in the *Crito*, where Socrates says that he must stay and die in obedience to the Laws. This has given aid and comfort ever since to people who think that we owe everything, even our lives, to the State. Such a view diverges somewhat suspiciously from the *Apology*, where we already have a reason why Socrates won't leave the city: he doesn't want to.
- 28e. "...Potidaea [432-430], Amphipolis [424] and Delium [424]..." Battles immediately preceding or in the Peloponnesian War. Socrates was no longer young (37) even at the earliest of these, and there are stories about him behaving strangely, i.e. going into trances. Whether he had begun his "investigation" or not, he was already becoming a conspicuous character.
- 28e-29a. "...those you had elected to command..." Athenian military offices were elective, and a commander could also be immediately punished if he failed. If Socrates "...abandoned my post..." either in battle, disobeying the generals, or in philosophy, disobeying the god, "That would have been a dreadful thing." Such disobedience would have made him guilty of "not believing that there are gods, disobeying the oracle, fearing death, and thinking I

was wise when I was not." A nice combination of military and religious duties with Socrates' own philosophical principles and convictions.

- 29a. "...to fear death...wise when one is not." A key point in the text for Socrates' attitude about death. He does not know whether death is good or bad. It might be the best thing ever, or the worse. So, not knowing which, Socrates is just not going to worry about it.
- 29b. "...blameworthy ignorance...no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not think I have." Here we have a repetition of Socrates' basic "human wisdom" claim, applied more specifically now to the issue of death. He knows he is ignorant. It is noteworthy, however, that Socrates is ignorant about the *underworld*. We don't have a hint here of Plato's later notions, in the *Phaedrus* and *Republic*, about a *celestial* afterlife. Socrates' religious conservatism, already evident in his beliefs about the sun and the moon, extends to the location of the realm of the death. This conservatism, of course, has its limits, as it does not extend to the character of the gods or, as we shall see, to the probable condition of the dead.
- 29b. "I do know (*oîda*), however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, be he god or man." A key explicit claim of knowledge, about which Socrates would have thrilled to question anyone else. Socrates cannot maintain universal ignorance while saying things like this. It sounds like he *has* to know *something* "beautiful and good."
- 29b. "...rather than things I know to be bad." Since Socrates doesn't know if death is good or bad, but he does know it is bad to disobey the god, he will obey the god regardless of any risks this may entail, even the risk of death.
- 29c-d. "Even if you acquitted me now..." A very long sentence, which tosses out in passing one of the most provocative lines of the entire *Apology*. Anytus said that the jury must execute Socrates, because if he is not executed or, even worse, not found guilty, he will have become a sensation and even more youth will flock to him and be corrupted. Now, if the jury finds him not guilty, but on the condition, with Anytus' statement in mind, that he "spend no more time on this investigation and do not practice philosophy," Socrates says he will simply ignore the verdict. Socrates goes *way out of his way here to provoke the jury. Does he really even need to mention a very hypothetical condition? Is a 500 man jury really going to deliberate among itself and come up with the condition that Socrates proposes? Hardly. So why does Socrates propose it? Just, it seems, to challenge the jury that he is going to do what he does, regardless of whatever the jury decides.*

accusations of Socrates' enemies, that he taught secretly, as actually true of Socrates. This section also reveals, with many others to be sure, Socrates' citizenship and kinship at Athens. This is worth noting because of the occasional bizarre "Afro-centric" claim that Socrates was an African. The evidence for that? Because Socrates was supposed to have had a "pug-nose," and the Greeks said that all "Ethiopians" had pug-noses. The absurdity of such reasoning, unfortunately, is characteristic, not just of such ethnic myth-making, but of most of the product of politicized educational theory and schools of education.

- *30a. "...the god orders me...no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god." Something new here. Not only is Socrates obeying the Oracle and conducting his investigation as part of the god's business, but this enterprise is actually for the good of the city. The product of Socrates' investigation is now supposed to be the best state of the soul.*
- *30b. "Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively." A rewritten sentence in the new edition. Grube's translation originally said, "Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence brings about wealth and all other public and private blessings for men." The original translation is better, since *ídiós* and *demósios* are indeed adjectives meaning "private" and "public," not "individual" and "collective" -- though *agathá* does really mean "goods" rather than "blessings." But both versions error, I think, in the translation of *areté*, which would be much better rendered as "virtue" here, rather than "excellence," since there is a moral quality to this that "excellence" does not capture.*
- *30b. "...if anyone says that I give different advice, he is talking nonsense." Of course, it was more like Socrates wasn't given any advice, except in his ironic and indirect way.*
- *30b-c. "...whether you acquit me or not..." Socrates restates, even more bluntly, the thrust of the previous passages, that he is going to do what he does, regardless of what they say or do, even if they could kill him many times. "Do not create a disturbance..." This sets off the jury again. Presumably things are being shouted at him, but we are not told what.*
- *30c. "...to your advantage..." Socrates picks up the theme, introduced above, of being a source of blessings to the city. It should already be clear that this is not going to be through his positive teachings, of which there are few. We have already seen that it may be through the efforts of those he exhorts, or directs in his own unique way, into worrying about their own virtue. If, however, someone became virtuous and benefited the city in response to Socrates' investigation, then presumably Socrates, in*

his ignorance, would no longer be wiser than all others. Socrates holds out that possibility, even though his wisdom remained safely superior in his own day, as it mostly would be in ours too.

- 30c. "...you will not harm me more than yourselves." Socrates may be a source, not just of blessings to the city, but of evils, though only by being mistreated. This extraordinary claim is founded on some of Socrates' typically paradoxical pet ideas.
- 30c-d. "Neither Meletus nor Anytus can harm me in any way...for I do not think that it is permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse." One of the more startling claims of the Apology. "Permitted"? By whom? Presumably by the gods, as Socrates implies more clearly later (41d). But how could any sensible person possibly think that good people are never harmed? It happens all the time. "...certainly he might kill me..." But Socrates decides, evidently because of his a priori confidence in the justice and providence of the gods, that anything that appears to be harm must not really be harm. This has a major consequence later on.
- 30d. "...doing himself much greater harm... attempting to have a man executed unjustly." This goes back to another one of Socrates' pet ideas, that **it is better to suffer evil than to do it**. This would make perfect sense for Plato, since suffering evil merely harms the body, while doing evil harms the soul. Socrates may well think the same thing, though he does not make that explicit here. It is also noteworthy that, again, Socrates credits his accusers with an evil intention that otherwise he finds hard to credit to anyone, since he thinks that no one knowingly does wrong.
- 30d-e. "...defense on my own behalf.. but on yours, to prevent you from wrongdoing by mistreating the god's gift to you..." A very ironic reversal of Socrates' role. He no longer worries about his own fate, but about that of the city. His defense now will be for the city, not for himself. Just how seriously does he take this? His words and actions, indeed, are always mixtures of his irony and of intense seriousness. Later the irony retreats a bit and we get glimpses of complete seriousness. "...if you kill me you will not easily find another like me." Socrates' irony at new heights, since it is unlikely that the jury would ever consider trying to find another like Socrates.
- 30e. "...as upon a great a noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly (mýōps)." The most memorable and durable image of the entire Apology, Socrates as a stinging horsefly. Indeed, the word "gadfly" in English now is hardly used for its original sense of real flies, but exclusively for the sort of "annoying person" (as Webster's says), like Socrates, who bothers politicians and others with pestering complaints or criticism.

This may tell us something important about Socrates' personality. The way in which he stood his ground and provoked the jury seemed arrogant to many people -- certainly to the jury. But was Socrates really an arrogant person? Was he full of himself? This may tell us. Would a Socrates with an inflated ego really compare himself to a fly? I think not. This is a rather unpleasant sort of creature, and the south end of a horse is also not a very pleasant place to be hanging out. The sacred animal of Athena, and the symbol of her wisdom, was the owl. A Socrates convinced of his own wisdom and dignity might well have chosen that animal over an unpleasant and undignified insect.

- *30e. "...never cease to rouse each and every one of you..." No need for irony here. He has roused them to the point of killing him.*
- *31a. "...aroused from a doze and strike out at me...could easily kill me, and...sleep on for the rest of your days..." The whole image of the gadfly reinforces the notion that Socrates' "benefit" to the city is not from his positive teachings. The fly doesn't have anything to say. Instead, by his questions Socrates just stirs people up. Not everyone understands the point of this, certainly Euthyphro didn't, and Socrates' accusers are not interested in figuring it out. But since Socrates' questions were about goodness, virtue, justice, piety, etc., the point was that people should really worry more about what these things are. With greater understanding and greater wisdom, leading to real virtue, the benefit for the city will be more tangible. "...unless the god, in his care for you, sent you someone else..." The first hint of the ironic threat that the god might "bless" the city with another annoying gadfly.*
- *31a-b. "...neglected my own affairs..." Indeed, Socrates seemed driven by an unusual sort of ambition, with no prospect of power, wealth, or position. He did get, as the result of this, something rather highly regarded by the Greeks, something that Achilles lost his life for obtaining: **fame**. Socrates had no way of knowing just how enduring his fame would be, but he would doubtless appreciate the irony that the antipathy of his accusers, and the injustice of the Athenian jury, would help create that fame in such a memorable form.*
- *31b. "...approaching each one of you like a father or an elder brother..." Here the irony gets the better of Socrates'. He may have approached people with a benevolent intention, but no one would ever mistake it for the ordinary advice of a father or brother. We have no trouble imagining what Euthyphro's father and relatives said to him, entirely appropriate in the circumstances, but*

Socrates' advice, however obvious to a perceptive person, was delivered in a far more indirect, confusing, and even frightening way -- Socrates' own analogy of seizing Euthyphro like Proteus might be enough to frighten anyone.

- 31b-c. "...charge a fee...some sense to it..." This should have laid to rest the impression that Socrates' was a Sophist. His accusers could not even have begun to make such a charge stick, while Socrates' poverty was his own best witness. Xenophon tells us that Socrates' entire net worth was only five minas, just enough for the "moderate" fee charged by the Sophist Evenus.
- 31c. "...I do not venture to go to the assembly and there advise the city." While Socrates has now claimed to be a great benefit, indeed a gift of the god, to the city, he has nevertheless not bestowed this gift in the customary and expected way, through political action. Now, Socrates might just explain the good reasons for not participating in politics, but this is not what he does at first.
- 31d. "I have a divine or spiritual sign... It is a voice, and...it turns me away from something I am about to do..." What Socrates actually says is "some divine (*theïon*) and spiritual (*daimónion*) [thing] comes to me..." The word "sign" is not there, but, just as in Meletus' indictment, we have neuter adjectives with no nouns. But we are then told that it is a voice (*phôné*). So Socrates hears voices. This doesn't sound good. Today the men in white coats might hustle him off -- "Now, Mr. Socrates, we have drugs that will make those nasty voices go away." Or, since people can no longer be committed just for hearing voices, he might end up wandering around on the streets annoying passersby with strange questions... Actually, that is what he did! But, as these things go, Socrates' voice is pretty unusual. It doesn't really tell him anything. He never quotes it. We never hear of him having conversations with it. All it does is stop him. Why it stops him, he has to explain for himself, as he does here. We know from Xenophon that this is why Socrates did not really prepare a defense: Whenever he would start thinking about it, his voice would stop him.

History would be a lot poorer if anyone who ever heard voices were simply dismissed as insane. The Prophet Muh.ammad, for instance, at first simply heard a voice say, "Recite!" Later, he believed this was the angel Gabriel (Jibrâ'îl in Arabic), and what he was then given to recite was the Qur'ân, which means "Recitation." Now, some might think that the world would actually be better off without such religious revelations, but sometimes the voices have a more immediate and practical application. France might never have defeated England in the

Hundred Years War if Joan of Arc, the "Maid of Orléans," had not briefly led and inspired the resistance. Nobody necessarily believed that angels were telling her things -- such messages could just as easily be deceptions of Satan -- but they did think it was possible. The test of having her pick the king, [Charles VII](#), out of a crowd was thought to be effective because, if Joan had been touched by the divine, she should be able to recognize the monarch, by divine right, of France -- the kings of France always claimed their throne directly from God, and never acknowledged the suzerainty of the [Emperors](#) or [Popes](#). It is not hard to imagine what would happen today if a teenage girl showed up at the Pentagon or White House claiming that God had sent her to lead the armies of America. This is no longer comprehensible.

- *31d. "...what has prevented me...and I think it was quite right to prevent me." His voice always stopped him from participating in politics, but, by merest coincidence, Socrates thinks that it was "quite right" to do this. "I should have died long ago..." Socrates does not even think he would have survived if he had gone into politics.*
- *31e-32a. "...no man will survive who genuinely opposes you or any other crowd (plêthos)..." When it comes to Socrates' attitude towards the democracy, this doesn't sound too good. People who complain about "crowds" or "mobs" (another meaning of plêthos) usually would just as soon not have them in charge of things. So Socrates clearly has a problem with the democracy at Athens. Does this mean that he rejects it utterly, that he would just as soon have an aristocratic government, more like Sparta? It doesn't look like it. Socrates does have a problem with the democracy, but we learn exactly what that is. His problem doesn't extend to the legitimacy of the whole. This issue, again, is discussed separately [elsewhere](#), but here we see the evidence in the text. "...really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public life if he is to survive..." The implied criticism here is that politicians were often prosecuted for "giving the Athenian people bad advice," or on trumped up charges that could bring the death penalty. This could be remedied, however, in the same way that is implied below.*
- *32a. "...deeds..." Socrates gives us two examples of his public actions, though how they are each public is somewhat different. "...not yield to any man contrary to what is right, for fear of death..." We are reminded that this is still all about Socrates' lack of concern for death in all his actions. "...commplace and smack of*

the lawcourts..." Perhaps Socrates has momentarily forgotten here that he is actually in a lawcourt.

- *32b. "...never held any other office..." If Socrates never participated in politics, how in the world did he end up on the Council (of Five Hundred)? Well, its membership was drawn by **lot**, so just as an Athenian citizen Socrates was liable to be called up. "...our tribe Antiochis was presiding..." As mentioned [above](#), the Presidency (Prytaneía) of the Council rotated between ten committees, one for each Tribe of Athens. So Socrates was a Prýtanis when the case of the naval battle came up.*
- *32b. "...try as a body the ten generals (stratêgoí) who had failed to pick up the survivors of the naval battle." The "naval battle" was the battle of Arginusae in 406. This was the second to the last battle of the Peloponnesian War (the last, of course, was [Aegospotami](#)). The Athenians won, but it was a hard fought battle, with many ships sunk and men in the water, and a storm was blowing up as night fell. The stratêgoí had to decide whether to risk the fleet, upon which the fate of Athens rested, to try picking up the survivors and the dead, or to leave the men and bodies in the water and beach the ships to protect them. They decided to save the ships. When word of this got back to Athens, the Assembly was furious, not just because the survivors had been abandoned, as Socrates says, but because the dead had been abandoned also.*

*This may be a bad example for Socrates to bring up, for the Assembly was angry with the stratêgoí about the dead for much the same reason that the jury is suspicious about Socrates now. What the Greeks believed was that the dead needed to be properly buried to have a chance at the afterlife. A proper burial meant that the dead needed a coin in their mouth, to pay the Boatman, **Charon**, who ferried the dead across the River Styx [[note](#)]. Without the coin, the dead would just wander on the banks of the Styx for ever. What the Assembly suspected was that the stratêgoí didn't believe this and so didn't much care whether they recovered the dead or not. Mentioning this, Socrates may remind the jury that they suspected the stratêgoí of impiety, just like him.*

- *32b. "This was illegal, as you all recognized later." The key statement. The stratêgoí could not be tried as a body, because such a procedure would allow the passions of the moment to overwhelm considerations of justice. The law, therefore, was passed precisely to prevent defendants getting railroaded through momentary anger.*

- 32b. "...only member of the presiding committee [only one of the *prytaneis*] to oppose your doing something contrary to the laws, and I voted against it." Evidently, the vote of the Prytanies had to be unanimous (another law) for action, so Socrates was holding things up, and the Assembly turned against him. Fortunately, prosecuting Socrates probably required another vote of the Prytanies, so that was not going to happen while he was present. Later tempers cooled off.
- 32b-c. "...run any risk on the side of law and justice rather than join you, for fear of prison or death, when you were engaged in an unjust course." This is the payoff. The criticism that Socrates has of the democracy is that the government of Athens, which largely means the Assembly, does not observe what we now call **the rule of law**. The law against trying the *stratêgoi* together was passed precisely to prevent the kind of the abuse that the Assembly did want to commit in this case. Socrates voted to uphold the law and effectively prevent the abuse, and the Assembly nearly prosecuted him for it.

The principle of the rule of law is now commonly misunderstood and misrepresented, usually by people who want to avoid it and to transform it into its opposite. The proper idea is to avoid the exercise of arbitrary authority, and to limit the extent of authority itself. If those in power find their power limited, and their jurisdiction restricted to only certain things, where they cannot just operate at their discretion, then this is the "rule of laws, not of men" -- where the law, not the will of the ruler, tells people what they can and cannot do.

*Although the abolition of the rule of law was characteristic of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, fascist and communist, a very similar desire for absolute and arbitrary power is a rot that has crept far into the democracies. Thus, when judges, police, and politicians say that the law and the Constitution mean whatever the Supreme Court says they mean, and that everyone else must simply obey, this is a fundamental violation of the rule of law, **not** an affirmation of it, because creatures of the government are then able to allow violations of the fundamental law, the Constitution, which is actually supposed to limit **them**, and to protect the citizen, with the citizen then left helpless against abuses that were supposed to be prohibited. As*

Thomas Jefferson already understood, this principle puts the foxes in charge of the hen house and means that any level of sophistry and dishonesty can be perpetrated, without practical remedy, to expand the power of government.

What is now commonly called the "rule of law" is therefore really its opposite, the principle of **blind obedience to authority**. No one, indeed, thought that the true principle would work all by itself. We must ask something rather like what Socrates asked Meletus: **Who** has knowledge of the law to enforce it in the first place? It will not enforce itself. Indeed. That was the genius of the idea of **checks and balances**, that different authorities would be jealous to limit each other's powers, and so would enforce the law and the Constitution against each other. Already in the *Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton, who later began planning the expansion of federal power, nevertheless argued that the federal government would enforce the Constitution against the States, and the States against the federal government:

Power being almost always the rival of power, the general government will at all times stand ready to check the usurpations of the state governments, and these will have the same disposition towards the general government. The people, by throwing themselves into either scale, will infallibly make it preponderate. If their rights are invaded by either, they can make use of the other as the instrument of redress. [Federalist Paper No. 28, Alexander Hamilton]

*It never quite worked out like this; for the Constitution did not contain a mechanism for its own enforcement, the States never had a formal means of checking usurpations of the federal government, and the eventual claim by the Supreme Court of final appeal in all Constitutional cases simply delivered to the federal government the coveted discretion of being **the judge of its own***

*powers. There was no redress, for instance, against the Alien and Sedition Acts, passed under John Adams, which grossly and undeniably violated the First Amendment, except to vote the Federalists out of power and repeal them. Luckily, that is what happened, but it already revealed a grave flaw in the system, which was not remedied when Adams' own Federalist Chief Justice, John Marshall, claimed ultimate Constitutional authority for the Supreme Court. The abuses piled up slowly but steadily, until by now large parts of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights have been **informally repealed** by mere judicial fiat, with the very idea of civil rights, which are supposed to preserve us from the power of government, turned around to become just another means of expanding the power of government. Indeed, the rule of law has been fundamentally abolished when Congress has ceded to bureaucrats the power to write regulations, often retroactively, that have the force of law, "interpret" those themselves, and even judge defendants in their own "administrative law" courts.*

Neither Jefferson nor Madison thought that Constitutional government would last forever. Certainly it hasn't. Nor is it clear when the lessons of the collapse of the United States Constitution can be applied to the reform of this, or any other, government. But Socrates, in a sense, already understands in the Apology what is needed. Like Socrates himself as a Prýtanis, someone must be in a position of authority with both the power and the interest to enforce the law against the abuses and usurpations of other authorities. We may say that Socrates was among the first to do that, and know what he was doing. Now, instead, we have forms of rule that George Washington himself called "real depotism."

- 32c. "...when the city was still a democracy." Perhaps Socrates took his criticism to actually discredit the democracy as a whole. If so, he soon had a chance to throw his lot with more a more congenial crowd. The Spartans defeated Athens and occupied the city in 404. They set up their Quisling friends as the Thirty Tyrants. If Socrates were a sympathizer of the Spartans and fundamentally disillusioned with the democracy, this should have been just the

ticket for him. It wasn't. He knew what these people were like and wanted nothing to do with them.

- *32c. "...the oligarchy (oligarkhía) was established, the Thirty summoned me to the Hall (thólos, Rotunda)... to bring Leon from Salamis, that he might be executed." As is so dismally familiar from the 20th century, tyrants begin murdering their political opposition. "...many such orders to many people, in order to implicate as many as possible in their guilt." A policy very familiar from the 20th century.*

When the government of East Germany disappeared, and the files of the Secret Police, the Stasi, were opened, it turned out that no less than 25% of the entire country had, at one time or another, voluntarily or involuntarily, been police informers. One woman, who had been jailed as a dissident, on the basis of an anonymous denunciation, had the chance, after the fall of the regime, to see in the Stasi files who had denounced her. It was her husband -- a great way to get a divorce with custody of the children, the house, no alimony, etc. I think a slightly less one-sided divorce ensued.

Involving others in the crimes of the regime is insurance against later retribution. The tyrants can always say, "Everyone was doing it!" Thus, East German border guards were prosecuted for shooting, under orders, people trying to flee to the West, but their superiors, who ordered the shootings, seem to have escaped largely unscathed.

- *32d. "...not to do anything unjust or impious." The East German guards, of course, didn't want to be shot themselves for disobeying orders. They were acting under duress. With Socrates, no duress would be effective. "...the other four went to Salamis and brought in Leon, but I went home." So poor Leon, evidently, did get executed; but Socrates ignored the whole business. "I might have been put to death for this..." The Thirty, trying to get Socrates associated with their crimes, instead turned him into an opponent. Logically, they would then have to kill him too. But the Spartans left Athens, and the hated Thirty were overthrown.*

So, when Socrates had the chance to get in good with the Spartan sympathizers, he was no more interested in their politics than we was in that of the democracy, but had to cross them nevertheless,

when they tried to involve him in their doings. The evidence of the Apology, then, gives us a good picture of Socrates' political views. (1) He was not an overt enemy of the democracy, which we can infer from his friendship with Chairephon; (2) he was not a sympathizer of the Spartans, which we can infer from his non-cooperation with the Thirty Tyrants; but (3) he did criticize the democracy as not, in effect, observing the rule of law, which was a perfectly apt criticism, and the basis of all subsequent efforts to create "responsible" or democratic government.

The actions of Athens, after all, discredited democracy for many centuries. Not only did Athens kill Socrates, but the democracy had carried on in such a high handed way with the city's own allies, that a large part of Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War was due to allies going over to Sparta. Unhappiness with Athens had begun even before the War. The Treasury of the League of Delos, into which contributions were originally paid to fight the Persians, and which had been kept at the temple of Apollo at Delos, was moved unilaterally by Pericles to Athens. Henceforth, the contributions were treated as "tribute" to Athens, and Pericles soon began spending them, not on the common defense, but on purely Athenian projects, like the temples on the Acropolis. The allies, now the subjects of Athens, of course, never liked this, but there wasn't much they could do about it. Once the War started, however, they could go over to Sparta. When Athens could recover such a defector, sometimes the men would be massacred and the women and children sold into slavery. After great defections to Sparta in 412, Athens very nearly did the same thing to the great island of Lesbos. Fortunately, Lesbos is rather far from Athens; and the day after the order was sent, the Assembly sobered up and thought better of it. A galley was then sent to countermand the order. It was at least 24 hours behind the original messenger but made up most of the time in the passage and arrived shortly after the unpleasant order was delivered. But it was really too late to save the popularity of Athens, even with other Greek democracies.

*With Plato as an active critic of democracy, and the triumph of monarchy in the **Hellenistic** period, democracy seemed to have little future either in theory or in practice. Much later, a government of mixed and mutually limiting forms, a **Republic**, on analogy with the Roman Republic, came to be admired and recommended by political writers like **Niccolo Machiavelli**. In time, as limited and constitutional government grew organically in England and elsewhere, it looked like these governments worked for the very reasons that Republics had been recommended. Such a government was then deliberately formulated in the Constitution of the United States of America. Unfortunately, as the United States and other governments became more democratic over time, the idea grew that the democratic aspect was all that counted to have good government. Rousseau's suggestion that the true Will of the People might not even be known to the People later enabled some of the worst dictatorships of the 20th century to call themselves "democracies" (often redundantly as "peoples' democracies"). But it is not democracy, just the rule of law, that is the foundation of just government. Democratic institutions are just some among many that can be used in a system of checks and balances to limit power and preserve the rule of law. The situation, critique, and fate of Socrates are the most sobering reminders of that.*

- *33a. "...in any public activity I may have engaged in, I am the same man as I am in private life." Socrates behaved in his rare political involvement in the same way that he always behaved. But again, since the way Socrates' behaves in public is well known to many people, the only way he can be seriously accused of teaching atheism, etc., to students is if he talks and acts differently in private than in public. The following passage denies any such differences and returns to the topic of his so-called "students" that he veered away from back at 23d.*
- *Students*
 - *33a. "...never come to an agreement...to act unjustly...nor with any one of those who they slanderously say are my pupils." Socrates returns, in midsentence, to the weakest part of his earlier defense. The very idea that Socrates has students is to slander him, since he is not a teacher in any ordinary sense. Indeed, "I have never been anyone's teacher." "...young or old, desires to listen to me....never begrudged this to anyone..." Since*

Socrates questions people in public, it is not his business to drive away anyone from the crowd that it draws. So "young or old" can follow him around.

- *33a. "...converse when I receive a fee and not when I do not." Not the principle of a self-respecting, and solvent, Sophist. Socrates has already denied taking fees, so this just reinforces that by the way. He is not a Sophist.*
- *33b. "...question the rich and the poor if anyone is willing to answer my questions..." Socrates has already said that he questions "citizen and stranger," so we have a pretty complete catalogue of who he is likely to meet on the street, except **women**. We don't hear about him questioning them, except in one story by Xenophon.*
- *33b. "And I cannot justly be held responsible for the good or bad conduct of these people, as I never promised to teach them anything and have not done so." Socrates' most forthright treatment of his association with people like Alcibiades, though he still doesn't name any names or address the seriousness of their crimes. But this is, finally, to the point.*
- *33b. "...anything privately that the others did not hear, be assured that is not telling the truth." A final denial by Socrates that he had any private or secret teachings. An important point, and here properly emphasized.*
- *33b-c. "...people enjoy considerable time in my company? ...enjoy hearing those being questioned who think they are wise, but are not. And this is not unpleasant (aêdés)." Socrates, of course, is fun. He is witty and amusing. This is good entertainment, especially for anyone who likes to see the pompous deflated, which is why Socrates attracts crowds and followers. The seriousness of his purpose, however, for anyone who did not already know him closely, is now revealed by a defense which is going to get him killed. Someone who was witty and amusing but had no other purpose in their practices could well scurry for cover, with profuse apologies (in the modern sense), once accused to real crime. But, instead, Socrates unfolds his mission from the god, which he takes seriously enough to die for.*
- *33c. "...enjoined upon me by the gods, by means of oracles and dreams..." We haven't heard about the dreams. "...and in every other way that a divine manifestation has ever ordered a man to do anything." This gives the impression that there is a lot more to this than Socrates has detailed. If he has been hearing his voice since childhood, and occasionally even goes into trances in public, there may well have been more to Socrates' relationship to the divine than we do ever hear about.*
- *33d. "...some of them how have grown older...then some of their kindred...if their family had been harmed by me." Now Socrates can ask if any of the older and wiser youth whom he had "corrupted" want to testify against him. Evidently not. Or, if they are still corrupted and under his spell, surely their family members who are aware of that will want to testify. Again, evidently not.*
- *33d-34a. "...Crito, my contemporary and fellow demesman..." Now we get an interesting list of Socrates' friends, younger and older, who are*

actually at the trial. Crito seems to be his best friend. Plato himself, and his brother Adeimantus (who turns up in the Republic) are there -- a nice way of telling us in passing that Plato's report of the Apology is his own eyewitness account. I think my favorite name here is "Theozotides."

- 34a. "...others...surely Meletus should have brought in... let him do it now; I will yield time..." Socrates gives Meletus the chance to produce any witnesses, victims or relatives, of his corruption to testify against him.
- 34b. "...the uncorrupted...have no reason to help me except the right and proper one, that they know Meletus is lying..." In a modern court, the whole case of Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon would be thrown out because they do not have **standing**, they are not personally "victims" of Socrates and, evidently, don't have any relatives who are -- they can't even get "victims" to testify by a public solicitation of them (as in a "class action" lawsuit). The only ground for their suit is the public good and the interest of the state. In that respect, Socrates now should be protected by the First Amendment, since everything he did would be protected by freedom of speech and of religion. That, of course, is an aspect of the rule of law. The Bill of Rights, unless it is shamelessly distorted, or even ignored, both of which **have happened**, secures a sphere of private action free of government interference or retaliation.

- Conclusion

- 34b-c. "...this...is what I have to say in my defense." Time to wrap up the defense. Socrates then reflects on the nature of the defense: "Perhaps one of you might be angry...when he himself stood trial...he begged and implored the jury...brought his children and...family into court, to arouse as much pity as he could..." If Socrates became so infamous because he was entertaining, the irony here is that the jury is put off because in this case Socrates has **not** been entertaining the manner to which they have become accustomed. They like defendants begging and pleading. We do not see a lot of this in trials now, since such appeals are not relevant to the charges, but in Athens a defense might consist largely of such supplications. Socrates, whether on principle or strategy, is simply going to be himself, whatever the consequences.
- 34d. "...might feel resentful toward me...cast his vote in anger." This will certainly be the case. "I do not deem there is, but if there is..." There certainly is a large part of the jury that will vote against Socrates just because he wasn't imploring them enough and was telling them how to be a good jury.
- 34d. "I too have a household...three sons...of whom one is an adolescent while two are children." So the seventy-year-old Socrates has two sons who are still children. So Socrates has been busy at home, perhaps even into his sixties. In light of Socrates and Plato's homoerotic comments, this is well worth keeping in mind. Alcibiades complained that Socrates never had sex with his young admirers. So we know who Socrates **was** having sex with -- his wife. "...I will not beg you...by bringing them here." In mentioning his "family," it is also noteworthy that, although he needs his wife to get the sons, he passes over saying anything about **her**, even that she exists. She was, of course, **Xanthippe**. We don't know how old she was, when Socrates married her, or anything. About all we hear is of

her complaints. But, with a husband who didn't work, never brought home any money, and kept getting her pregnant in his sixties, I think it would be astonishing if she **didn't** have some complaints. We can imagine a woman who was uncomprehending and unworthy of her great husband, but it also seems that Socrates simply might not have included her in his "investigation." He was traditionalistic enough in court not to mention her in public -- women are not public business -- and so probably was traditionalistic enough not to include her in his professional life.

- 34d. "...not through arrogance...nor through lack of respect for you." Since Socrates denies that he is acting out of arrogance, he is evidently aware that his defense could be interpreted in that way. He is really more respectful of the jury than they may deserve, since they should expect the kind of defense he makes, and not the kind that they would rather see.
- 34e. "...my reputation and yours and that of the whole city..." Socrates, indeed, has his own ideas about his own dignity, that of the court, and that of the city. While the court doesn't seem to do very well, the trial of Socrates is ironically a great tribute to Athens, just because Socrates was allowed to make his defense, his friends were allowed to witness it, and the record of it, produced by people like Plato and Xenophon, became celebrated documents of Greek philosophy, and of the history of Athens. As I have mentioned, defendants in American courts are not allowed to make any defense they want, even when it is on so relevant and significant an issue as the Constitutionality of the laws being applied. Since the rule of law has been undermined, and the Supreme Court has preempted final Constitutional interpretation, Thomas Jefferson's principle that juries will enforce the Constitution is now voided, and judges will not even allow the argument to be put to a jury. Of course, things have not gotten so bad in American courtrooms as in so many "judicial" proceedings in the 20th century, when defendants are tortured into confessions, or allowed **no** defense, or condemned for their opinions, or even for laughing or affection, as political crimes.
- 34e-35a. "...generally believed...that...Socrates is superior to the majority of men." A very hypothetical assumption for the inference that such a person, rightly or wrongly, should not behave so as to bring disgrace upon himself. "...doing amazing things as if they thought it a terrible thing to die..." Of course, defendants usually do think it a terrible thing to die. "...and as if they were to be immortal if you did not execute them." A nice touch. Socrates, who thinks he will die soon enough anyway, is well aware that execution is not the only way to die.
- 35a-b. "...bring shame upon the city..." The dignity of the city is compromised if people are allowed or rewarded for "pitiful dramatics" in court. "...a stranger...would assume that those who are outstanding in virtue among the Athenians...are in no way better than women." The thing that Socrates says that seems the most overtly misogynistic -- at least if that is how to interpret him invoking the stereotype of women as emotional and given to hysterics (from *hystéra*, womb).
- 35b. "...more readily convict a man..." Not too fair. As Socrates says himself, the justice of the case should be the basis of the judgment. Condemning something for

their lack of dignity would be no better than the jury condemning Socrates for his lack of deference.

- *35b-c. Indeed, this is what comes next: "...not the purpose of a juryman's office to give justice as a favour...but to judge according to law..." So the justice of the case is what should count. "This is irreverent conduct for either of us." In other words, the oath is to the gods, to do right, and violating it is no less than impiety.*
- *35c-d. "...in a way that I do not consider to be good or just or pious..." A nice list of the qualities upon which Socrates bases his actions. It would be nice, after all, to ask him what these are in just the same way that he asks others. "...especially...as I am being prosecuted..for impiety..." He is not going to act in a way that **he** considers impious, when he is actually being accused of impiety -- note that this all still refers to his manner of defense. "...I would be teaching you not to believe that there are gods..." That is, if Socrates did what he considered impious, then he would have to act and believe as though there were no gods to punish him, and his actions would bespeak this atheism. "...for I do believe in them, as none of my accusers do..." Sometimes it is said that the whole Apology is an ironic put-on and that Socrates never does actually say he believes in the gods. But here we have the passage to refute that. *Nomízô* unequivocally means "I believe." The curious thing is what comes next, "as none of my accusers do.." Since Socrates acts like his accusers know that they are prosecuting an innocent man, then they know that they are behaving unjustly and impiously. The only way that they would act that way is if they do not fear the punishment of the gods. But, not gods, no punishment. So they must not believe in the gods. This, again, passes over Socrates' own principle that no one knowingly does wrong. Socrates' accusers, one way or another, think that they are doing something just and pious.*
- *35d. "I leave it to you and the god to judge me in the way that will be best for me and for you." It isn't just that the jury is judging Socrates. The god has a part, both to do what is best for Socrates, which may be to die, and but also to judge the jury, who will have to face their own consequences.*

The Sentence (35e-38c)

- *Before the Apology picks up again, there is a hiatus in which the actual vote is taken. Socrates is found guilty. To start what now we call the "penalty phase of the trial," Socrates' accusers propose their penalty, which they put at death. Now Socrates is supposed to offer an alternative for the jury, which will decide between them.*
- *35e-36a. "...not being angry...not unexpected..." Socrates does not really say why he is not angry at the jury. The verdict could be entirely expected, but he still could be angry at people for not doing the right thing. If he forgives them for being ignorant, he doesn't say so. If the verdict was expected, then Socrates deliberately made a kind of defense that he knew would be ineffective. "...much more surprised at the number of votes....a switch of only thirty would have acquitted me." Out of 501 jurors, this should mean that there were 280 guilty votes and 221 not guilty votes. Taking 30 from the 280 and giving them to the 221 would get Socrates up to 251, a bare majority. Pretty good, for so provocative and uncompromising a defense.*

- 36a-b. "...cleared on Meletus' charges..." Since Socrates only cross-examined Meletus, the closeness of the vote does not reflect well on his answers. "...if Anytus and Lycon had not joined him...he would have been fined a thousand drachmas for not receiving a fifth of the vote." A nice touch. The unanswered accusers may have carried the day. A thousand drachmas is a good fine for a weak lawsuit -- \$15,000 in 1990 dollars, by the reckoning [here](#).
- 36b. "...the penalty at death... What counter-assessment..? Clearly it should be a penalty I deserve..." The problem is that, not being guilty, Socrates doesn't deserve any penalty. Today, "unrepentant" defendants who have been found guilty are often sentenced more harshly. If, however, they are actually innocent, there is no moral reason why they should pretend to be repentant. Socrates is not the kind of guy to pretend anything in a situation like this. If the jury thought he was an affront during his defense speech, they ain't seen nothin' yet.
- 36b. "...not led quiet life...have neglected...wealth, household affairs...offices...clubs and factions..." Socrates gave up the ordinary goods of city life to pursue his investigation. "...no use either to you or to myself..." Again, we have the aspect of public benefit from Socrates' private doings. "...not to care for...belongings before caring...good and wise as possible...not to care for the city's possessions more than for the city itself..." We get a detail of the private and public benefits of Socrates' action, though, as noted above, it may have been hard to tell from what Socrates actually did that all this is what he meant.
- 36d. "...some good..." Oh, oh. "...according to my deserts, and something suitable..." We are headed for trouble here. Socrates doesn't deserve any punishment. For what he is really guilty of, he deserves a reward instead. The jury is not going to like this.
- 36d. "...a poor benefactor who needs leisure...? Nothing is more suitable...than...to be fed in the Prytaneum, much more...than for...a victory at Olympia..." So, instead of death, public meals. This is not going to go over well.

The "Prytaneum," Prytaneîon, is where the Prytanes met and contained the hearth of Athens, sacred to Hestia, just as the temple of the Vestal Virgins at Rome contained the hearth of Rome. The meals here were an interesting institution. At Sparta, all the male citizens were expected to eat at the common mess. At Athens, a representative group of citizens were invited by lot to something that was then rather like the family meal of the city. Others, like Olympic victors, might be honored with a permanent seat at the meals. Someone so honored became a parásitos -- our word "parasite." So Socrates is proposing that he be made a "parasite" on the city.

- 36d-e. "The Olympian victor makes you think yourself happy, I make you be happy." This must have been very perplexing to the jury, requiring the idea that even if you think yourself happy, you may not be, while happiness may depend on something else entirely. The Stoics would follow Socrates with the proposition that happiness should depend entirely on virtue. Consequently, we find the Roman Emperor [Marcus Aurelius](#), miserable and bereaved, trying to persuade himself that he is really happy.
- 36e. "...he does not need food, but I do." True enough. But if the jury kills him, then he won't actually need the food.

- 37a. "...you may think...I speak arrogantly..." Again, Socrates is aware of the effect he is having. But, like Luther, he cannot do otherwise: "I am convinced that I never willingly wrong anyone..."
- 37b. "...a trial for life should last not one but many days..." It is a little startling to realize that Socrates was tried and condemned all in one day. Now, high profile murder trials, the only ordinarily cases that are now "trials for life," can take many months. "...not easy to dispel great slanders..." The only reason that the present charges against Socrates were credible was because of the reputation he already had. In avoiding a more forthright discussion of the "young men," Socrates actually didn't do the best job in dispelling those slanders.
- 37b-c. "...I am not likely to wrong myself..." The very idea of a penalty for what he does is ridiculous to Socrates. "What should I fear?" A question perhaps importantly similar to Kant's "What can we hope?" Socrates has already said that he does not fear death, "of which I say I do not know whether it is good or bad.." But now we get other possibilities. "Imprisonment?" There was, of course, not much of a prison system in ancient Greece. Socrates' objection, interestingly, is that he would not want to be "subjected" to the magistrates. The virtue of archaic corporal punishments, like whipping, however brutal, is that they were actually over relatively quickly. Locking somebody up can be a matter of years, and modern "humane" prisons have turned out to be vicious in ways that even mediaeval dungeons were not. "A fine, and imprisonment until I pay..." That doesn't help, since Socrates doesn't have much money. "Exile?" This was a very common punishment in Greece, and relatively humane, considering that the next state might just be a few miles away. Athens had even had a special kind of "election," the **Ostracism**, where just anyone could be voted into exile -- the name came from óstrakon, the piece of broken pottery that was used to record a vote, as even the ancient Egyptians had often used instead of expensive papyrus.
- 37c-e. "...so unreasonable to suppose that other men will easily tolerate my company..." This is a noteworthy passage in light of the other reasons for not going into exile that Socrates gives in the *Crito*. Instead of a rather disturbing pitch for obedience, here Socrates' gives prudential reasons: In exile, either he will talk as he usually does, or he won't. If he does, he would probably get in the same kind of trouble that he has at home. If he doesn't, then the disappointed "young men" will get him driven out. "It would be a fine life at my age..." Passing from city to city -- not unlike a Sophist, actually -- is no life that Socrates wants.
- 37e-38a. "...will you not be able to live quietly, without talking?" An important section. Why can't Socrates just shut up? Hasn't he done this long enough? "...impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will...think I am being ironical (eirōneuómenos)." While the Greek word can just mean "to dissemble," we can tell from this that the modern, subtle meaning of "irony" in fact goes back to Socrates himself, who here uses the word about himself. Socrates' manner does make it possible that not everyone is going to pick up on what he really does believe and what he doesn't. Even modern commentators have not taken his "mission from the god" story in the *Apology* seriously. And if it really did figure in Socrates' defense, as Plato has it, then the evidence of Xenophon's *Apology* would seem to indicate that it just didn't register with many of those hearing it. But Socrates' relationship to the god has several dimensions, as we see

in the question of an easy death, such as Socrates seeks, through the "sweet shafts," *aganà bélea*, of Apollo.

- 38a. "...the greatest good...to discuss virtue...and those other things...you will believe me even less." As we saw in the earlier passages about the beneficial nature of Socrates' mission, here we find that examining goodness, justice, beauty, and the other things that Socrates asks about is "the greatest good." Just as an aside in this sentence, however, we find the most famous statement in the Apology: "...for the unexamined life is not worth living for a man (ho dè anexétastos bíos ou biôtòs anthrópô)." It should be noted that the Greek word bíos means a "way of life" rather than just biological life (as used in the modern word "biology" itself). Also, Socrates uses anthrópos, "*man*, human being" (Latin homo), rather than anér, "man, male" (Latin vir) -- though, not being Plato, he probably is not thinking about an unexamined life being similarly not worth living for a woman. More importantly, what is translated here as "worth living" is just one word in Greek, biôtós, "to be lived, worth living." A concise English equivalent might be "liveable": "**The unexamined life is not liveable for (a) man.**"

*This famous statement, curiously, is actually not explained in its context. Whether a life is "worth living" or "liveable" is a different issue from whether it is commanded by the god or even is the greatest good. After all, many people find the task of doing their duty or doing the good oppressive and unendurable. So why would quiet really be unliveable for Socrates? We have, perhaps, already seen the answer. The "greatest good" sounds rather like the "human and social kind of excellence," and Socrates himself has claimed to possess "human wisdom." If "human wisdom" is the best we can do, because only the god is really wise, then Socrates' investigation is itself the "human and social kind of excellence," which means it is **the perfection of being human**. The cows in the pasture do not ask each other about the meaning of life -- except in Gary Larson cartoons. Only human beings ask questions about being and value, or anything. So if Socrates had to be quiet, this could mean ceasing to be human. That would be unendurable to someone who has come to appreciate the uniqueness of human abilities.*

- 38a-b. "If I had money...penalty at the amount I could pay, for that would not hurt me." Of course, a fine is supposed to hurt, since it is a punishment! "...unless...at the amount I can pay, and perhaps I could pay you one mina of silver." This, according to Xenophon, would be a fifth of Socrates' entire net worth, or \$1500 in 1990 dollars. Although this is better as a penalty than free meals at the Prytaneum, it is way too little, too late as a sign of contrition or a serious proposal.
- 38b. "Plato here...bid me put the penalty at thirty minae [\$45,000], and they will stand surety..." Again we hear of Plato. This sounds like a real fine, but it hardly seems like something to impress the jury. "Oh, my friends will pay." That is no punishment of Socrates. It may even irritate the jury as much as the "free meals" proposal.

Last Thoughts (38c-42a)

- *The jury votes to put Socrates to death, evidently by a larger margin than they had to find him guilty. This means that some who voted "innocent" have now turned around and voted "death"! Such was the power of Socrates' counter-proposals! Clearly, his friends wanted him to live, even at their own expense, but it hardly looks like he was quite as interested in such an outcome. With the trial actually over, what Socrates says next is not a formal part of the proceedings. There is evidently some paperwork to be taken care of, so he takes the opportunity to say some more to the jury.*
- *38c. "...the sake for a short time...the reputation and the guilt...of having killed Socrates..." Indeed, the infamy of having killed Socrates was not forgotten, ever. But, with suitable irony, it did not ruin the fortunes of Athens. The reputation of Socrates as a wise man was established, but then Athens, even by killing him, borrowed his glory.*
- *38c. "...my age...advanced in years...close to death." How "close to death" is Socrates? Is this just an actuarial expectation, or does Socrates feel some real infirmities? We are not told. He seems vigorous enough to have given a speech like this.*
- *38d-e. "...to those who condemned me...lack of such words... lacked not words but boldness and shamelessness..." Letting the "death" votes know, as he had said already, that he was not going to give them what they wanted from his trial. "I would much rather die after this kind of defense than live after the making the other kind." He knew what the cost could be, but debasing himself for their entertainment was intolerable.*
- *38e-39a. "...on trial or in war...escape death by throwing away one's weapons and by turning to supplicate one's pursuers..." We are reminded of the detailed comparison of Socrates' situation to battle. As a philosopher, Socrates is more in the school of the Spartans at Thermopylae, fighting to the death.*
- *39a-b. "...not difficult to avoid death...more difficult to avoid wickedness, for it runs faster than death. Slow and elderly...I have been caught by the slower pursuer; whereas my accusers, being clever and sharp, have been caught by the quicker..." A wonderful image. Old, ugly, stumpy Socrates, waddling along, is overtaken by death. His young, sharp, and probably good looking acusers, too clever for their own good, are overtaken by their own wickedness.*
- *39b. "...condemned to death by you, but they are condemned by truth to wickedness and justice." Having lived his life, or even a couple of lives, death is a small loss for Socrates. For someone to have been condemned by the truth, however, would be much worse. We have seen in our century, however, that the wicked often do all they can to keep the truth from getting out. Socrates' day in court is the most enduring tribute imaginable to such liberal spirit, in ancient form, that the democracy at Athens was able to boast. Today, lies are the stock in trade of government and academia, even in the democracies, and a lone dissenter, however worthy, is easily ignored. Socrates would have little to complain about the durability of his fame, however easily distorted in popular presentations.*
- *39b. "...had to happen...it is as it should be." A little fatalism goes a long way, though Socrates has brought upon himself his fate quite deliberately.*
- *39c. "...prophecy to those who convicted me...when men prophesy most, when they are about to die." What the Greeks thought, indeed, is that those near death can simply see things that others can't. They are closer to the next world. This notion is still around. It even turned up in an episode of the television series, *The X Files*, where people were having visions of those recently murdered. Agent Mulder explains that this happens to*

those near death themselves. Disturbingly, Agent Scully, recently diagnosed with cancer, herself has some of the visions of the recently dead.

- 39c-d. "...vengeance much harder to bear...more people to test you...younger and you will resent them more..." A prophesy in one sense well fulfilled. Athens became the very center of Greek philosophy, already in Socrates' time, but also for the future all the way until Plato's Academy was closed in 529 AD. All through the *Hellenistic* and Roman periods, only Alexandria and, for a while, Rome itself came anywhere near competing with Athens as a center of learning. So "more people" definitely followed in the footsteps of Socrates. However, with fine irony, there was little resentment about this. Philosophy made the fortune and fame of Athens, which became a kind of company town for all the Schools whose names are now part of ordinary modern language -- Academics, Peripatetics, Hedonists, Cynics, Stoics, Epicureans, etc. This, the beauty of the Acropolis, and the commercially advantageous location hallowed Athens, to the point where the modern capital of *Greece* can hardly be imagined anywhere else -- Thessalonica had been the Roman capital of the area and the second city of mediaeval *Romania*.
- 39d. "...not to discredit others but to prepare oneself to be as good as possible." The fault is so easily found in others, in class, race, or religious enemies, of which we have seen so dismal a catalogue in the 20th century.
- 39e. "...during the time that the officers of the court are busy..." Our only clue why Socrates is able to make his final remarks.
- 39e-40a. "...those who voted for my acquittal...stay with me awhile...as being my friends, I want to show the meaning of what has occurred." Now we get Socrates' most heartfelt thoughts about his own, condemned, situation. In one sense, this is the supreme moment of the Apology.
- 40a. "...surprising thing...my familiar prophetic power, my spritual manifestation..." An extensive rewrite of the translation. Grube originally had "my usual mantic sign," now expanded into two phrases. The Greek phrase is *hê (the) eiôthuîá (accustomed) moi (my) mantikê (mantic) hê (the) toû (of the) daimoníou (of spiritual)*. *Eiôthuîá* is just a perfect feminine participle, from *éthô*, "to be accustomed," where we get words like "ethos" and "ethics." "Mantic" is the Greek word, but "prophetic" or "oracular" are reasonable translations. But Grube did leave out *toû daimoníou*, which posed the same problems, lacking a noun, that we have been noticing all through the Apology. It is Socrates, not just his accusers, who leaves out the nouns. But in this case, with all the feminine adjectives, we may guess that one missing noun is actually "voice," *phôné*. The word Socrates uses for "sign" is neuter.
- 40a. "...frequently opposed me, even in small matters, when I was about to do something wrong..." His voice often stopped Socrates. Notice, it is his inference that it has done this because he was about to do something "wrong." The voice did not explain things. Socrates has to supply that. A basic explanation is that he is being prevented from doing wrong. This is fundamental in what comes next.
- 40a. "...now...I was faced with what one might think...to be, the worst of evils, my divine sign (*tò toû theoû semeîon*) has not opposed me..." Here we get a noun, in fact two, but one has been translated as an adjective. Socrates says "the sign (*sêmeîon*) of the god (*toû theoû*)." "Divine" conceals the fact of Socrates' statement that the sign, indeed, is from the god.

- 40a-b. *Since the sign has not stopped him "when I left home," "when I came into court," or "at any time...during my speech," Socrates must infer that he was never doing anything wrong. "What has happened...may well be a good thing, and those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken." So his voice is not just preventing him from doing wrong but preventing bad things from happening to him. So, now condemned to death, death must be a good thing.*
- 40c. *"...it is impossible that my familiar sign (eiôthòs sêmeïon) did not oppose me if I was not about to do what was right (agathón, a good thing)." So Socrates knows that death is good, but he still doesn't know just what it is. That, and this inference itself, is something that he is going to have to supply for himself. This is one of the most enduring qualities of the Apology, that at this point Socrates is in no different a situation than we are. The possibilities that he lays out are still before us. In this respect, the human condition has not changed at all in two thousand years.*
- 40c. *"...there is good hope that death is a blessing, for it is one of two things..." Most of the rest of the text deals with these two possibilities. "either the dead are nothing (mêdén) and have no perception of anything..." The word here is the same as in the Delphic Precept, mêdèn ágan, "nothing too much," or "Nothing in Excess." This is what people normally fear the most about dying -- becoming nothing. Interestingly, Socrates does not advance the kind of argument that [Parmenides](#), would have suggested, that the word "nothing" is self-contradictory and meaningless -- or a similar argument that something cannot become nothing, the view of the [Bhagavad Gita](#). Instead, Socrates accepts the possibility of the nothingness, and deals with it.*
- 40d. *"...lack of perception, like a dreamless sleep, then death would be a great advantage... that night during which a man slept soundly and did not dream, put beside it the other nights and days of his life, and then see how many days and nights had been better... not only a private person but the great king would find them easy to count..." A dreamless sleep is without worry or suffering. Even the Great King (mégas basiléus), the [King of Persia](#), would be happier with such dreamless sleep than with most of the other things that go on in life, waking or dreaming. This is a striking thought when compared to the theory of the [Mân.d.ûkya Upanis.ad](#), where dreamless sleep is a higher consciousness, more real, and pure **bliss** (ânanda) compared to waking or dreaming realities. That is what we get from a Parmenidean-like move, where what seems at first to be **Nothing** actually turns out to be **Being** itself. Socrates, indeed, does not need to go into that kind of metaphysics to reflect that dreamless sleep is untroubled.*
- 40e. *"...all eternity would then seem to be no more than a single night." This raises questions about time itself that are beyond the best metaphysics in the history of philosophy. Having existed, and then become nothing, is the rest of time just infinite? If time ends somehow, or is closed into a loop, what happens to all that has ever been? Does our own existence come back up, in an "eternal recurrence" (like in the Pythagoreans or Nietzsche)? There is little that either metaphysics or physics has settled about all this.*
- 40e-41b. *"...if, on the other hand, death is a change from here to another place, and...all who have died are there, what greater blessing..." An afterlife also sounds good, which is what people still tend to believe. "...true judges..." Socrates can also hope for a more responsible hearing from the "demi-gods" (hêmithéoi, half-gods), as well as meeting all the famous people of history, and those unjustly convicted like him.*

- 41b. "Most important, I could spend my time testing and examining people there, as I do here, as to whom among them is wise, and who thinks he is, but is not." What a prospect! The Athenians go to all this trouble to get rid of this guy, and then, years later, they die and go to the afterlife, and there he is, doing all the same stuff! This is about the cleverest threat that anyone has ever made.
- 41c-d. "It would be an extraordinary happiness to talk with them... In any case they would certainly not put one to death for doing so. They are happier there than we are here in other respects, and for the rest of time they are deathless, if indeed what we are told is true." A revealing passage; for, in the classic forms of Greek mythology, this is mostly **not** "what we are told is true."

In Homer, the dead are miserable, and even "without sense or feeling." In the Odyssey, Odysseus makes a blood sacrifice to call up the dead and give them enough rationality that he can talk to them. One of the spirits he talks to is that of Achilles, whom he assumes is as honored among the dead as he was among the living. But Achilles disabuses him: he would rather be farming a small plot among the living than be king of the dead. The irony of this is bitter indeed, since the entire Iliad was about how Achilles gained fame at the cost of his life. Now he says it wasn't worth it. Most other ancient peoples shared this idea, as we see in the [Epic of Gilgamesh](#), or even in the Bible, where Sheol doesn't sound too promising. Only the Egyptians held out a hope that the afterlife could be as good or better than this one.

*Socrates says that the dead are "happier" (eudaimonésteros) and "deathless" (athánatos). In Homer, these are more like attributes of the **gods**, not of humans, whether dead or alive. Where does Socrates get this stuff? Well, there was a source. Perhaps from Egyptian influence, there was a movement in Greek religion that did promise a happier afterlife -- real life, not just the miserable shadow existence of Homer. These were the "mystery" cults or "mystery religions." Initiation into the "mysteries" conveyed immortality. Later, they would be proper independent religions -- Isis, Mithraism, and Christianity itself. In Socrates' day, the Greek cults were integrated into Greek religion. The most famous was in Athenian territory at the temple of Demeter at Eleusis: the **Eleusian Mysteries**. We do not know if Socrates was an initiate or not. If he was, he certainly would not say much about it. At Athens, riots sometimes started when theatergoers thought that some play was divulging secrets from the Mysteries. The secrets, indeed, were kept so well, that no full account of them survives, not even from Christian writers who would have had no scruples about exposing pagan blasphemies.*

So when Socrates says, "what we are told," he may actually have been told something of the sort. He certainly would not consider the Homeric possibility, since death then would be bad rather than good. And he did decide that death was good. But what about the gods? To be happy and

*deathless is about all that distinguished the Homeric gods from humans. But Socrates has already introduced something else. His gods are **good and wise**, unlike Homer's often mean and foolish deities. So now the dead may be happy and deathless, but they still can only have "human wisdom" and remain distinct from the gods themselves.*

- 41d. "...good hope as regards death...a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death, and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods." A final statement of Socrates' peculiar idea that the good cannot be harmed, though here with the implication that this is guaranteed by the gods, who watch over us -- as Socrates certainly felt watched over himself, by his "sign." This all by itself would imply that death is a good thing, since death happens to good people as well as bad.
- 41d. "...not happened of itself, but it is clear to me that it was better for me to die now and to escape from trouble." We are not told what the "trouble" is. Looking at Xenophon's Apology, the trouble may just be the debilities of old age. Socrates does not want to become senile and lose his faculties. From Xenophon's point of view, this seems to be the whole story of the Apology. Clearly, Plato was more interested in Socrates acting out of his characteristic convictions rather than merely provoking the jury because he wanted to die and get it over with. So the "trouble" may be the remaining clue that, after all, Socrates did not want to live too long. It does not detract from Socrates that he had humble and human motives behind his performance, and not just the grand purposes of displaying the "human and social kind of excellence."
- 41d-e. "So I am certainly not angry with those who convicted me, or my accusers." Just because they haven't really done him any harm, not because they thought they were doing what was right. "Of course, that was not their purpose when they accused and convicted me...for this they deserve blame." No unusual theories about moral will here. They did not mean well and they are conventionally blameworthy for it.
- 41e. "This much I ask from them: when my sons grow up, avenge yourselves by causing them the same kind of grief that I caused you..." An extraordinary request, for his accusers to continue Socrates' own investigation! They are not likely to do this, even as vengeance on Socrates' own sons. "Reproach them as I reproach you..." Such an ironic request at least rubbs it in that Socrates wasn't doing anything wrong. It wouldn't bother him, in fact it would gratify him, for others to do it as well. "If you do this, I shall have been justly treated..."
- 42a. "I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god." Here the inferences about the afterlife are set aside. We are back to "human wisdom," with only the god knowing the truth.

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Commentary on the Apology of Socrates, Note

*The Underworld is supposed to have five rivers: the **Acheron**, "Woe," **Cocytus**, "Wailing," **Lethe**, "Forgetful," **Phlegethon**, "Fire," and **Styx**. "Hateful." **Plato** could use the Lethe in his own vision of the afterlife, where each person, before rebirth, would drink of the river and forget all they knew. This complemented his theory of knowledge as **Recollection**. In Dante's Divine Comedy we get an elaborate version of all this. The Acheron is at the top of Hell, outside the First Circle, surrounding all of it. The Styx occupies the Fifth Circle, surrounding the City of Dis, which is Nether Hell. The Phlegthon, which burns, is part of the Seventh Circle. The Cocytus forms a frozen lake, the Ninth Circle, surrounding Satan. The Lethe is not actually part of Hell but flows out of Purgatory, down through the Earth, and empties into the Cocytus.*

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