

Dr. J's lecture on
Socrates and *The Apology*

(a social, political and philosophical overview)
(some of this is in note format - citations from Treddenick's Penguin edition)

The Trial Of Socrates: texts by two pupils, Plato and Xenophon - both just the defense speech, not the prosecutor. Xenophon: authenticity of text disputable – he was in Asia Minor at time of trial. Plato: supposedly there, but wrote the Apology about ten years later.

Apology: a literary document

SOCIAL VIEW

Start with charges against Socrates, of being a cosmologist and a sophist, as he himself points out in the *Apology*:

"There is a clever man called Socrates who has theories about the heavens and has investigated everything below the earth, and can make the weaker argument defeat the stronger." (Section A, 18c)

"Socrates is committing an injustice, in that he inquires into things below the earth and in the sky, and makes the weaker argument defeat the stronger, and teaches others to follow his example." (Section A, 19b)

"if you have heard anyone say that I try to educate people and charge a fee, there is no truth in that either..." (Section B, 19e)

You already know that cosmologists, or natural philosophers, were men who sought natural explanations for material processes, as opposed to supernatural explanations. They rejected Poseidon's trident blow as an explanation for earthquakes, much like we eventually come to favor the natural explanation for thunder over "God is bowling" or "God is wrestling with the devil." Those are both examples of a culture drawing on the divine for answers to questions about natural processes. But cosmologists rejected the old gods.

Sophists were philosophers who turned their attention away from investigation of the natural world and adopted a much more practical approach to the use of philosophy. Sophists traveled wherever they could find a client, and they earned their living by teaching such arts as rhetoric and argumentation, skills that people eagerly paid to learn and use (and often abuse). Protagoras (481-411 BC), earliest of the Sophists, is credited with saying "man is the measure of all things." Protagoras will be expelled from

Athens in 415 BC. Sophists pointed out that while *physis* (nature) is controlled by an unchanging set of laws that remain the same wherever you go, *nomos* (custom, or man-made law) is arbitrary and changes from state to state. This empowered men to think that they could shape the world and be masters of their own fates. Originally, the goal of sophistry was defined as "teaching excellence or virtue (*arete*)" primarily through public speaking (the way any Greek of the 5th century made his way). But sophistry became known as unscrupulous teaching that leads to unscrupulous behavior. Because Athenian upperclass men made their way in society by learning the skills of rhetoric and argumentation – remember you were your own lawyer and press agent – then the sophists had more students than they could handle. Everyone wanted to learn this new-fangled way of manipulating facts so they could come out ahead. After all, isn't that what rhetoric and argumentation is all about? Manipulating your audience? Knowing the needs and likes of your audience so that you satisfy them? So sophists sold their wares to the highest bidder, and taught whatever skills would lead to success. So sophists eventually came to be known for teaching young men to successfully argue anything two ways, and being able to make any argument, right or wrong, win.

In 424, Aristophanes' comedy *The Clouds* presented a Socrates held up to ridicule as just such a sophist. Think of Athenian Comedy as the Saturday Night Live of its day. The same way we can never think of Linda Tripp again without thinking of John Goodman's portrayal of her, the Athenian audience always had Aristophanes' vision of Socrates in mind - a clownish man who operated a school in which he taught both Just and Unjust Logic, possibly the basis for the charge that not only did Socrates himself believe these things, but that he made a living by teaching these skills to the impressionable youth of Athens. In the play, the lackadaisical and irresponsible youth Pheidippides is sent to the school by father, who despairs over junior's mounting gambling debts. In a desperate ploy, he enrolls P in Socrates' school so he can learn "unjust logic" or how to make the weaker argument outweigh the stronger, or "sophistry" so he can weasel his way out of paying his debts. P becomes such an apt pupil that by the end of the play he beats up his father, threatens the same to his mother, and argues the righteousness of his acts by, in the words of Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith (Socrates on Trial), "the most shamelessly tortured reasoning." In the *Apology*, Socrates makes a pointed reference to Aristophanes and the damage he has done to his name.

PHILOSOPHICAL VIEW

"An unexamined life is not worth living." (Section M, 38a)

"An evil man can't hurt a good man" (Section I, 30d)

"No man commits evil intentionally...he is just uninformed as to the Good" (Section F, 25e)

"Make your first and chief concern not for your bodies or for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls" (Section H, 30b)

"Nothing can harm a good man either in life or after death and his fortunes are not a matter of indifference to the gods." (Section N, 41d)

So sophistry is double-edged: it allows rhetorical victory at the cost of morality. If there was no objective way to measure *arete*, or "excellence," then how was one supposed to know what really was "good" and what really was "bad?" Did "goodness" really exist or was everything relative? In fact, because of this very issue, Socrates identifies himself as an ardent anti-sophist, although some of his techniques are reminiscent of theirs. But most importantly, Socrates' philosophy offers a solution to this problem of "moral relativism" – that a shipwreck, for example is bad for the sailor but good for the shipbuilder.

Let's play a little game to see what Socrates is about.

Can you define courage? Let's try – and remember, it is my job to shoot down whatever definition you provide. xxxxxxxxxxxx (inevitably student answers will reveal that courage is one thing here and another there - depending on circumstances). The answer that "it depends" recalls the moral relativism of the sophists – a philosophy Socrates wholeheartedly argues against. It was this very theory that gave rise to such unsettledness in the minds of Athenians – one famous sophist offers a memorable example of this kind of argumentation:

So sickness is bad for the sick, but good for the doctor; death is bad for the dead, but good for the undertakers and monumental masons; a good harvest is good for the farmers but bad for the grain-traders; shipwrecks are bad for the shipowners but good for the ship-builders; when iron is blunted and worn away it is bad for others but good for the blacksmith; when pottery is broken it is bad for others but good for the potter; when shoes wear out and fall to pieces it is bad for others but good for the cobbler; in athletics victory in the quarter mile is good for the victor but bad for the losers.
(*Dissoi Logoi* 1.3 - translation from *The World of Athens*, 292)

FORMS

But let us return to the definition of courage...CAN it be defined? According to Socrates, yes. Socrates believes that courage is one of the many Forms or Ideas that reside in the Realm of Ideas, a sort of cyberspace for Principles. These forms are eternal and unchanging. It is unfortunate for us, though, that they reside in the Realm of Ideas, a place outside our sensible world. Socrates, like many of his fellows, believed that Reality was not the world that you and I live in and can perceive with our senses – any optical illusion (such as putting a ruler in a glass of water and having it appear bent) proves that we cannot trust our senses to perceive and understand the world. (also use this example: Mash episode – Hawkeye loses his sight, the rain drilling on the tent was

like a steak sizzling on the grill.) We must seek wisdom and knowledge via another route.

So how else can we know anything if we can't use our senses? Well, like many others of his time, Socrates was a Pythagorean, a follower of the pre-Socratic philosopher Pythagoras. Now Pythagoras believed that the entire cosmos worked according to mathematical principles – in other words, that there was a plan, a great cosmic dance orchestrated by a divine intelligence. As we have already discussed, the Greeks' concept of Philosophy embraced areas of inquiry that we might call philosophy, natural science, religion, metaphysics... but to these Greeks it was all the same – the pursuit - or love – of knowledge – *philos sophos*.

Part of Pythagoras' understanding of the cosmos was that our souls were eternal, immortal – so his view of the cosmos was a kind of matrix into which everything plugged in – including us. Socrates believed that the eternal Forms – which reside in the eternity of the Realm of Ideas – was accessible via the eternal part of ourselves – our soul. And that by cultivating our soul we could establish a conduit through which we could achieve access to that Realm and that information. The trick, of course, is learning how to achieve contact, how to open that door. In the Apology, Socrates says that the cultivation of the soul is the primary business of life, and that an unexamined life is not worth living. And this is the key: it is through cultivating the soul – engaging in inquiry, asking questions, rejecting blind acceptance of ideas -- that we cultivate our souls. Of course, you have to have an open mind to engage in this activity – which reminds us of the answer to the Oracle's suggestions that "there is no man wiser than Socrates" – he is wise only because he realizes his own ignorance. Others – like Meletus and Anytus, for example – go through life with blinders on, necessarily blundering their way through because they don't know that they can't see.

It is kind of funny that none of us can pinpoint a definition of the word of "courage" that works in all cases, and yet we all know it when we see it. (Students will argue that a racist spouting hate in a black church or anti-semitic rhetoric in a synagogue is showing a form of courage since he is acting according to his principles in the face of danger. But the immorality of the action bothers them - how can something immoral - based on "wrong" principles - be "courageous?" And who is to say that that is wrong? What system of ethics are we relying on? Socrates offers a morally guided universe (not unlike a religion, eh?). That is why although students will argue about the racist being courageous, *everyone* agrees that a man running into a burning building to save a baby is courageous. How can we be so sure??? How *do* we know courage when we see it???)

Now I want you to think computers for a minute, and you will see why in a moment. It has probably happened to everyone in this room at one time or another that you finished writing something on your word processor, went to save it, and it disappeared. Lost! Gone! And after you stopped panicking, you went down the hall and found that one guy who could magically find it again, even though you thought it irretrievably lost. We all know that everything you write onto disk remains there, even after you erase it.

And that this information can be accessed by those who are initiated into the "mysteries of the computer".

Socrates believed that not only were souls eternal, but they were recycled as well. Think of your soul as a hard drive that has been wiped clean of all the information it once knew because it comes from the realm of ideas. Your job is to live a life in which you cultivate your soul – i.e., access that encoded information such as the true definition of Truth, Goodness, Justice, etc. From the root word for "to know" in Latin, "cognosco", we get words such as "cognition", for example. And knowledge and how we know what we know is the crux of Socrates' philosophy. The reason that we cannot define "courage" right off the bat, but we certainly know it when we see it, is because we are not seeing it for the first time – that is an expression of what occurs when you cultivate your soul - the information for "What is courage" has always been within us, written on our hard drive - so when we see it, we are knowing it again – *re-cogno*, or "recognizing it". In other words, when a form (such as "courage") is performed, we become informed.

Although the Realm of Ideas is not mentioned *per se* in the *Apology*, its philosophy can help us to understand this dialogue. It is easy to see how Socrates' confidence in his spirituality can be misunderstood as arrogance. But that's how Socrates knows Justice when he sees it: he has cultivated his soul during his lifetime in order to access the encoded information. His world is a morally informed world. Socrates knew it wasn't just when the Athenian Assembly unconstitutionally decided to try all the Athenian generals together in one trial after they abandoned sailors thrown off their ships during the Battle at Arginusae in 406. In response, Socrates walked out of the tholos (the round building in the Agora where the council met) and refused to participate. He also knew it wasn't just when the oligarchic tribunal called the Thirty conscripted private citizens to do their dirty work and ordered Socrates himself to round up Leon of Salamis – an innocent man deemed a threat to the government because of his wealth, status and integrity. Socrates refused to participate and certainly would have been punished had the Thirty not been abolished soon thereafter. And Socrates knows that this trial isn't just either – and that the charges against him are bogus, utterly trumped up. So he refuses to play along (i.e., beg for his life as opposed to showing them the injustice of their actions).

POLITICAL VIEW

"Socrates is guilty of corrupting the minds of the young, and of believing in supernatural things of his own invention instead of the gods recognized by the State." (Section F, 24c)

Charges suggesting political motivation for the trial:

The charge: Corrupting the youth - in a particularly political way. Many of Socrates' young students were aristocrats, suspicious of the Man like any young generation, inspired by Socrates' idea to question authority, think for themselves, reject the establishment. Unfortunately, some of these young men were the ones behind the oligarchic revolution, such as Critias. So it is understandable that some would link

Critias and his pro-oligarchic view with his teacher, Socrates. And even Plato in his earlier dialogues comments on Socrates' criticism of Athenian statesmen, sentiments, and policies. This from Xenophon's *Apology*:

"Socrates was said to have taught his companions to despise the established laws by insisting on the folly of appointing public officials by lot, when none would choose a pilot or a builder or a flautist by lot, nor any other craftsman for work in which mistakes are far less dangerous than mistakes in statecraft. Such sayings, his accuser argued, led the young to despise the established constitution and made them violent."

Understandable, but not necessarily supportable – just because Socrates has some issues with the details of the running of the government doesn't necessarily mean that he espouses a different form of government. And just because both Xenophon and Plato are diehard oligarchs doesn't necessarily mean that Socrates is – you will be hard-pressed to prove that he *is*, using the texts we have.

But it is understandable how they tried to make a case against Socrates corrupting the young who turned against the democracy, like Critias and Charmides. But this court wants it both ways: they try to blame Socrates for all their ills – including their democratic ones! Xenophon specifically names Alcibiades as another youth ruined by Socrates. A traitor, true, but always a democrat. BUT. Officially – at least openly - Socrates could not have been tried for such crimes of corrupting the likes of Critias and Alcibiades, because in 403/2, amnesty was granted for crimes committed before and during the reign of the Thirty Tyrants. And it was our very own Anytus who was involved in the passing of that law. The law said that you couldn't *try* a man for crimes committed before the reign of the Tyrants – it didn't say that you couldn't insinuate guilt by association. And apparently this was a common practice for those prosecuting individuals with reputations earned in earlier days. But Socrates himself calls our attention to his refusal to go along with the immoral actions of the Thirty – Leon of Salamis, despite grave personal danger. And just in case Critias and Alcibiades are not the only such corruptees, Socrates himself invites any witness who can prove that harm came from his teaching to come forward - this would not be a violation of amnesty. But no one does.

And, too, Chaerophon was a great friend of both Socrates and the democracy. Which brings us to yet another possibly politically motivated charge against Socrates: the charge of impiety.

The charge: that Socrates "disbelieves in the gods" (Section D, 23e)

The refutation: in fact, his entire life is devoted to proving the Oracle of Delphi right, he claims. This same Chaerophon once asked the Oracle whether there was any man wiser than Socrates and was told "no." Although he found that hard to believe, Socrates knew that Oracles spoke in riddles, so he set out to understand the answer. In the text of the *Apology* Socrates outlines his actions: he questioned everyone with a reputation

for wisdom – poets, craftsmen, politicians – and after engaging them in conversation, determined that they in fact were not wise at all, and concluded that no man was wiser than he because he admitted his ignorance. Socrates himself realizes that he has earned a bad reputation as well as political enemies in his pursuit of wisdom:

"They were so jealous, I suppose, for their own reputation, and also energetic and numerically strong, and spoke about me with such vigor and persuasiveness, that their harsh criticisms have for a long time now been monopolizing your ears. There you have the causes which led to the attack upon me by Meletus and Anytus and Lycon, Meletus being aggrieved on behalf of the poets, Anytus on behalf of the professional men and politicians, and Lycon on behalf of the orators." (Section D, 23a)

And Socrates shows us his technique – his Socratic method of backing his opponents into rhetorical corners – in his cross-examination of Meletus (Section G, 26b- 28a).

Socrates' defense: that he has followed the god's will *despite* numerous disadvantages; lacking the time for other personal or civic pursuits (23b7-9), he has earned only suspicion and enmity from his countrymen (21e1-2, 22e6-23a3, c7-d2) as well as great personal poverty (23b9-c1). But he will risk even death to complete his mission: encouraging people to give up their pretense of wisdom (23b4-7) – to convince them to care for wisdom, truth, and the perfection of the soul more than wealth, reputation and honor (29d2-30b4)

Second charge of impiety: "of believing in supernatural things of his own invention instead of the gods recognized by the State." (Section F, 24c)

He gets Meletus to contradict himself in regard to the second charge of impiety – that Socrates has introduced new gods into the city (although he also says that Socrates believes in no gods at all, an impossibility for both to be true):

Robert Garland (in *Introducing New Gods: The Politics of Athenian Religion*, Cornell 1992 [see below](#)) argues that the most significant charge against Socrates is the charge of impiety. Or atheism? Which is it? Well, it's both, and neither, and it is the exchange between Meletus and Socrates on this issue – the grandest example of the Socratic method in the *Apology* – that proves the trumped-up-ness of the entire affair. Socrates gets him to admit that at one and the same time, he is being tried for "not acknowledging the gods at all (atheism) and "that he honors god other than those official gods of the Athenian State." A big clue that the charge is politically inspired comes when Meletus confuses Socrates with Anaxagoras, expelled from Periclean Athens for claiming that the Sun and Moon were not gods at all – in fact he described the moon as a white-hot rock about the size of the Peloponnesus (Galileo is charged with heresy against the Catholic church for making almost exactly the same observation...over 2000 years later in 1632). Impiety laws passed in the 450's were clearly directed against Pericles' circle and passed by his detractors. And Socrates' reliance on the authority of the Oracle of Delphi couldn't have helped his cause much –

the Oracle had fallen out of favor in Athens since its prophecies all seemed to favor her opponents in the PP War.

In addition to the oracle of Apollo, Socrates claims to follow another divine guide, his *daimonion* – a guiding voice, a sign of the gods. The exact definition was taken up by Kierkegaard in his doctoral dissertation. An objective reality outside Socrates? A figment of his imagination? His conscience? A private oracle? Can't tell:

"I am subject to a divine or supernatural experience, which Meletus saw fit to travesty in his indictment. It began in my early childhood – a sort of voice which comes to me; and when it comes it always dissuades me from what I am proposing to do, and never urges me on. It is this that debars me from entering public life, and a very good thing, too, in my opinion...the true champion of justice, if he intends to survive even for a short time, must necessarily confine himself to private life and leave politics alone." (Section J, 31d-32a)

Two problems arise for Socrates because of this *daimonion*:

1. This "sign" was taken to have "crypto-oligarchical" leanings, since it appeared to cause Socrates to work outside the system – outside democracy. Socrates claimed that it spoke to him and convinced him to stay out of politics – that a just man could not practice politics. And understandably so, this seemed to offend those in charge...

2. Note that he is not accused of introducing *false* gods, just *new* ones. Just like his philosophy (Realm of Ideas) rejects the sensible world in which we live as a way to achieve knowledge, Socrates seems to reject the Athenian gods - and this is taken as a politically subversive act since the Athenian religion is a state religion. As Kierkegaard argues in his dissertation: "Socrates replaced the concrete individuality of the Greek gods (anthropomorphosed, with temples and sacrifices) with something completely abstract - this was seen as subversive and undermining, as standing outside the established canon of public and private gods."

Socrates spends the remainder of his speech explaining his philosophical view of how men should spend their time – how they should live, what they should view as important, how they should determine the action they take. And he makes possibly his most famous statement when he identifies himself as the gadfly sent to sting Athens into action, to awaken the sleeping citizens from their torpor, to show them the way to enlightenment, enrichment, and a fulfilled life. Socrates is not shy in suggesting that Athens needs him – that "you will not easily find another like me – and if you take my advice, you will spare my life" (Section I, 30e-31b)

And, too, we can see the rotten core of the Athenian democracy at this point when we look at the numbers: although we don't know the exact number of jurors in the case (500 or 501), we do know that Socrates is found guilty by a margin of 60 votes: 280 to 220 (or 221). Socrates fairly dares them to go through with their injustice, not helping a bit by offering a reasonable suggestion for punishment, which he is asked to do. (He

suggests that he be treated as a state hero and be given the same free lunch every day for a year that is reserved for winners at the Olympics!). When the verdict of death comes back, we find an overwhelming vote (*an increased majority – over 2/3*) for the death penalty, rather than a fine. This means that at least 50 jurors who had originally deemed Socrates not guilty sentence him to death!

***For further discussion of this chapter of Garland's book, see [Professor Dan Tompkins' notes on Temple University's Intellectual Heritage Program's website.](#)

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