

THE APOLOGY OF SOCRATES

Selected extracts

In 399 BCE Socrates was tried before a jury of 500 Athenian citizens (selected by lot). He was accused (by Anytus and Melitus) of making innovations in the religion of his country, and corrupting the youth. Trials in Athens at this time followed a formal course: those who brought charges laid them out, together with supporting evidence; the accused responded with whatever evidence they thought appropriate; the jury then voted guilty or not guilty (a simple majority was required one way or the other); if the vote was guilty, the accusers nominated an appropriate sentence and then the accused nominated an alternative one; the jury then voted on which one they thought should be accepted (again the decision required a simple majority). Plato's dialogue, The Apology, is his version of the trial, starting at the point where Socrates rises to offer his defence.

1 – Socrates speaks of the public reputation that had built up concerning him

Socrates begins suggesting that his accusers are both particular individuals (Anytus and Melitus) and the more difficult to pin down 'popular rumour' which links him to contemporary sophists – clever men who charged large sums of money to young men; young men who aimed to gain power and influence through sophisticated arguments and rhetoric.

- 18b In the first place, therefore, O Athenian, it is just that I should answer the first false accusations of me, and my first accusers, and afterwards the latter accusations, and the latter accusers. For many have been accusers of me to you for many years, and who have asserted nothing true, of whom I am more afraid than of Anytus and his accomplices, though these indeed are powerful in persuading; but those are still more so, who having been conversant with many of you from infancy, have persuaded you, and accused me falsely. For they have said, that there is one Socrates, a wise man, studious of things on high, and exploring everything under the earth, and who also can make the worse to be the better argument. These men, O Athenians, who spread this report are my dire accusers. For those who hear it think that such as investigate these things do not believe that there are Gods. In the next place, these accusers are numerous, and have accused me for a long time. They also said these things to you in that age in which you would most readily believe them, some of you being boys and lads; and they accused me quietly, no one speaking in my defence. But that which is most irrational of all is this, that neither is it possible to know and tell their names,
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d except some one of them should be a comic poet.¹ Such however as have persuaded you by employing envy and calumny, together with those who being persuaded themselves have persuaded others, - with respect to all these, the method to be adopted is most dubious. For it is not possible to call them to account here before you, nor to confute any one of them; but it is necessary, as if fighting with shadows, to make my defence and refutation without any to answer me. Consider, therefore, as I have said, that my accusers are twofold, some E having accused me lately, and others formerly; and think that it is necessary I should answer the latter of these first; for you also have heard these my accusers, and much more than you have those by whom I have been recently accused. Be it so. I must defend myself then, O Athenians, and endeavour in this so short a space of time to remove from you the calumny which you have so long entertained. I wish, therefore, that this my defence may effect something better both for you and me, and that it may contribute to some more important end.

2 – The divine nature of Socratic philosophizing.

Socrates denies that he is a sophist,² and offers evidence – firstly that he has never claimed to know anything which might be called scientific, secondly that he has never attempted to teach ‘the power of persuasion’, and thirdly, that he has never charged for his philosophic conversations. He continues:

20c Perhaps, however, some one may reply: But Socrates, what have you done then? Whence have these calumnies against you arisen? For unless you had more curiously employed yourself than others, and had done something different from the multitude, so great a rumour would never have been raised against you. Tell D us, therefore, what it is, that we may not pass an unadvised sentence against you. He who says these things appears to me to speak justly, and I will endeavour to show you what that is which has occasioned me this appellation and calumny. Hear, therefore; and though perhaps I shall appear to some of you to jest, yet be well assured that I shall tell you all the truth. For I, O Athenians, have acquired this name through nothing else than a certain wisdom. For of what kind is this wisdom? Perhaps it is human wisdom. For this in reality I appear to possess. e Those indeed who I just now mentioned possessed perhaps more than human wisdom, which I know not how to denominate: for I have no knowledge of it. And whoever says that I have, speaks falsely, and asserts this to calumniate me. But, O Athenians, be not disturbed if I appear to speak somewhat magnificently of myself. For this which I say is not my own assertion, but I shall refer it to one

¹ Meaning Aristophanes.

² Sophists (literally “a wise man”) were those who taught clever techniques of arguing, speaking, and persuading. They generally charged a great deal of money for so doing, operating either from permanent schools or by moving from town to town around the Greek world.

21a who is considered by you as worthy of belief. For I shall adduce to you the Delphic Deity himself as a testimony of my wisdom, if I have any, and of the quality it possesses. You certainly then know Chaerepho: he was my associate from a youth, was familiar with most of you, and accompanied you in and returned with you from your exile. You know, therefore, what kind of a man Chaerepho was, and how eager in all his undertakings. He then, coming to Delphi, had the boldness to consult the oracle about this particular. Be not, as I said, O Athenians, disturbed: for he asked if there was any one more wise than I am. The Pythian priestess, therefore, answered that there was not any one more wise. His brother can testify to you the truth of these things; for Chaerepho himself is dead.

b Consider then on what account I assert these things: for I am going to inform you whence this calumny against me arose. When, therefore, I had heard this answer of the oracle, I thus considered with myself, What does the God say? and what does he obscurely signify? For I am not conscious to myself that I am wise, either in a great or in a small degree. What then does he mean in saying that I am most wise? For he does not lie, since this is not lawful to him. And for a long time, indeed, I was dubious what he could mean. Afterwards with considerable difficulty I betook myself to the following mode of investigating his meaning. I went to one of those who appear to be wise men, that here if any where I might confute the prediction, and evince to the oracle that this man was more wise than

c I. Surveying, therefore, this man, (for there is no occasion to mention his name, but he was a politician;) while I beheld him and discoursed with him, it so happened, O Athenians, that this man appeared to me to be wise in the opinion of many other men, and especially in his own, but that he was not so. And afterwards I endeavoured to show him that he fancied himself to be wise, but was not. Hence I became odious to him, and also to many others that were present.

d Departing, therefore, I reasoned with myself that I was wiser than this man. For it appears that neither of us knows anything beautiful or good: but he indeed not knowing, thinks that he knows something; but I, as I do not know anything, neither do I think that I know. Hence in this trifling particular I appear to be wiser than him, because I do not think that I know things which I do not know. After this I went to another of those who appeared to be wiser than him; and of him also I formed the same opinion. Hence also I became odious to him and many

e others.

Afterwards however I went to others, suspecting and grieving and fearing that I should make enemies. At the same time however it appeared to me to be necessary to pay the greatest attention to the oracle of the God, and that, considering what could be its meaning, I should go to all that appeared to possess

22a any knowledge. And by the dog,³ O Athenians, (for it is necessary to tell you the truth,) that which happened to me was as follows. Those that were most celebrated for their wisdom appeared to me to be most remote from it; but others who were considered as far inferior to them possessed more of intellect. But it is necessary to relate to you my wandering, and the labours as it were which I endured, that the oracle might become to me unconfuted. For after the politicians I went to the poets both tragic and dithyrambic, and also others, expecting that I should here immediately find myself to be less wise than these. Taking up, therefore, some of their poems which appeared to me to be the most elaborately written, I asked them what was their meaning, that at the same time I might learn something from them. I am ashamed indeed, O Athenians, to tell you the truth; but at the same time it must be told. For, as I may say, all that were present would have spoken better about the things which they had composed. I discovered this, therefore, in a short time concerning the poets, that they did not effect by wisdom that which they did, but by a certain genius and from enthusiastic energy, like prophets and those that utter oracles. For these also say many and beautiful things, but they understand nothing of what they say. Poets, therefore, appeared to me to be affected in a similar manner. And at the same time I perceived that they considered themselves, on account of their poetry, to be the wisest of men in other things, in which they were not so. I departed, therefore, also from them, thinking that I surpassed them by the very same thing in which I surpassed the politicians.

Socrates then went on to speak to craftsmen and, although skilled and knowing in their craft, yet even these were unable to give reasoned causes for their activities beyond the most superficial. All this produced a feeling of enmity toward him. At the same time many “think that I am wise in these things, the ignorance of which I confute in others. It appears however, O Athenians, that Divinity is wise in reality, and that in this oracle he says this, that human wisdom⁴ is but of little, or indeed of no worth . . .”

3 - Socrates address the specific accusations

27b But let us jointly consider, O Athenians, how he appears to me to have asserted these things. And do you, O Melitus, answer us, and, as I requested you at first, be mindful not to disturb me if I discourse after my usual manner. Is there then any man, O Melitus, who thinks that there are human affairs, but does not think that there are men? Pray answer me, and do not make so much noise. And is

³ Elsewhere Taylor notes that to swear by the dog is an invocation of Hermes – the God of the discerning mind – for a dog is a creature able to tell friend from stranger, an indication of power of Hermes as it descends though the various kingdoms and species of nature.

⁴ This is the key to the profound meaning of Socrates when he said that he *knew* that he knew nothing. For, as I have elsewhere observed, he only intended by this to signify the nothingness of human when compared with divine knowledge. T Taylor.

there anyone who does not think that there are horses, but yet thinks that there are equestrian affairs? or who does not think that there are pipers, but yet that there are things pertaining to pipers?

There is not,

c O best of men. For I will speak for you, since you are not willing to answer yourself. But answer also to this: Is there anyone who thinks that there are daemoniacal affairs, but yet does not think that there are daemons?

There is not.

How averse you are to speak! so that you scarcely answer, compelled by these things. Do you not, therefore, say that I believe in and teach things daemoniacal, whether they are new or old? But indeed you acknowledge that I believe in things daemoniacal, and to this you have sworn in your accusation. If then I believe in daemoniacal affairs, there is an abundant necessity that I should also believe in the existence of daemons. Is it not so?

It is.

d For I suppose you to assent, since you do not answer. But with respect to daemons,⁵ do we not think either that they are Gods, or the sons of Gods? Will you acknowledge this or not?

Entirely so.

e If, therefore, I believe that there are daemons as you say, if daemons are certain Gods, will it not be as I say, that you speak enigmatically and in jest, since you assert that I do not think there are Gods, and yet again think that there are, since I believe in daemons? But if daemons are certain spurious⁶ sons of the Gods, either from Nymphs, or from certain others, of whom they are said to be the offspring, what man can believe that there are sons of the Gods, and yet that there are no Gods? For this would be just as absurd, as if someone should think that there are colts and mules, but should not think that there are horses and asses. However, O Melitus, it cannot be otherwise but that you have written this accusation, either to try me, or because there was not any crime of which you could truly accuse me. For it is impossible that you should persuade any man who has the smallest degree of intellect, that one and the same person can believe that there are daemoniacal and divine affairs, and yet that there are neither daemons, nor Gods, nor heroes. That I am not, therefore, impious, O Athenians, according to the accusation of Melitus, does not appear to me to require a long apology; but what I have said is sufficient.

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⁵ Daemons were considered to be intermediaries between Gods and mortals, arising from the outflowing powers of the Gods.

⁶ The word Taylor translated here as spurious is *nothoi* – used to indicate a child born from the union of unequal partners – such as a free person and a slave – so that Socrates is following the old Greek belief that daemons are the offspring of a partnership of God (or Goddess) and a lesser being, such as a mortal, demi-god or a nymph.

Socrates add some other remarks concerning the situation in which he finds himself – especially because he considers the response from the Delphic oracle (as reported at 21a) as a command from the God to philosophize:

29c So that neither if you should now dismiss me, (being unpersuaded by Anytus, who said that either I ought not to have been brought hither at first, or that, when brought hither, it was impossible not to put me to death, telling you that if I escaped, all your sons studying what Socrates had taught them would be corrupted,) if besides these things you should say to me, O Socrates, we now indeed shall not be persuaded by Anytus, but we shall dismiss you, though on this condition, that afterwards you no longer busy yourself with this investigation, nor philosophise, and if hereafter you are detected in so doing, you shall die, - if, as I said, you should dismiss me on these terms, I should thus address you: O d Athenians, I honour and love you: but I obey Divinity rather than you; and as long as I breathe and am able, I shall not cease to philosophise, and to exhort and indicate to any one of you I may happen to meet, such things as the following, after my usual manner. O best of men, since you are an Athenian, of a city the greatest and the most celebrated for wisdom and strength, are you not ashamed of being attentive to the means of acquiring riches, glory and honour, in great e abundance, but to bestow no care nor any consideration upon prudence and truth, nor how your soul may subsist in the most excellent condition?

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30d Be well assured then, if you put me to death, being such a man as I say I am, you will not injure me more than yourselves. For neither Melitus nor Anytus injures me; for neither can they. Indeed, I think it is not lawful for a better to be injured by a worse man. He may indeed perhaps condemn me to death, or exile, or disgrace; and he or some other may consider these as mighty evils. I however do not think so; but, in my opinion, it is much more an evil to act as he now acts, who endeavours to put a man to death unjustly. Now, therefore, O Athenians, it is far from my intention to defend myself, (as someone may think,) but I thus speak for your sake, lest in condemning me you should sin against the gift of Divinity. For, if you should put me to death, you will not easily find such another (though the comparison is ridiculous) whom Divinity has united to this city as to e a great and generous horse, but sluggish through his magnitude, and requiring to be excited by a certain fly. In like manner Divinity appears to have united such a one as I am to the city, that I might not cease exciting, persuading and reproving each of you, and everywhere sitting among you through the whole day.

4 – The vote goes against Socrates, and his response

In the Athenian judicial system, if a person was found guilty, the accuser was then to nominate a punishment and, in turn, the accused countered with an alternative punishment – at which point the jury voted again to decide which of the two was the most appropriate. In the first vote Socrates was found guilty; in the second,

Melitus called for the death sentence, and once Socrates had responded (he stated that he thought he should be given a pension because he had given the citizens the benefit of his questioning, but his friends persuaded him that he should offer to pay a fine which they would pay). Of the two, the jury voted for death (by a greater margin than the one which found him guilty!).

- 38c Now, O Athenians, your impatience and precipitancy will draw upon you a great reproach, and give occasion to those who are so disposed, to revile the city for having put that wise man Socrates to death. For those who are willing to reproach you will call me a wise man, though I am not. If, therefore, you had waited but for a short time, this very thing, my death, would have happened to you spontaneously. For behold my age, that it is far advanced in life, and is near to death. But I do not say this to all of you, but to those only who have condemned me to die. This also I say to them: Perhaps you think, O Athenians, that I was condemned through the want of such language, by which I might have persuaded you, if I had thought it requisite, to say and do anything, so that I might escape punishment. Far otherwise: for I am condemned through want indeed, yet not of words, but of audacity and impudence, and because I was unwilling to say such things to you as you would have been much gratified in hearing, I at the same time weeping and lamenting, and doing and saying many other things unworthy of me, as I say, but such as you are accustomed to hear and see in others. But neither then did I think it was necessary, for the sake of avoiding danger, to do anything illiberal, nor do I now repent that I have thus defended myself; but I should much rather choose to die, after having made this apology, than to live after that manner. For neither in a judicial process, nor in battle, is it proper that I or any other should devise how he may by any means avoid death; since in battle it is frequently evident that a man might easily avoid death by throwing away his arms, and suppliantly converting himself to his pursuers. There are also many other devices in other dangers, by which he who dares to do and say anything may escape death. To fly from death however, O Athenians, is not difficult, but it is much more difficult to fly from depravity; for it runs swifter than death. And now I indeed, as being slow and old, am caught by the slower; but my accusers, as being skilful and swift, are caught by the swifter of these two, improbity. Now too, I indeed depart, condemned by you to death; but they being condemned by truth, depart to depravity and injustice. And I acquiesce in this decision, and they also. Perhaps, therefore, it is necessary that these things should subsist in this manner, and I think they subsist properly.

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Socrates speaks to those on the jury who have not voted for his execution, and notes that his guiding voice (his daemon) has not restrained him from speaking as he has:

40b I will now, therefore, tell you what I apprehend to be the cause of this. For this
 thing which has happened appears to me to be good; nor do those of us apprehend
 c rightly who think death to be an evil; of which this appears to me to be a great
 argument, that the accustomed signal would have opposed me, unless I had been
 about to do something good.

After this manner too we may conceive that there is abundant hope that death is
 good. For to die is one of two things. For it is either to be as it were nothing, and
 to be deprived of all sensation; or, as it is said, it is a certain mutation and
 d migration of the soul from this to another place. And whether no sensation
 remains, but death is like sleep when unattended with any dreams, in this case
 death will be a gain. For, if any one compares such a night as this, in which he
 so profoundly sleeps as not even to see a dream, with the other nights and days
 of his life, and should declare how many he had passed better and more pleasantly
 e than this night, I think that not only a private man, but even the great king himself,
 would find so small a number that they might be easily counted. If, therefore,
 death is a thing of this kind, I say it is a gain: for thus the whole of future time
 appears to be nothing more than one night. But if again death is a migration from
 hence to another place, and the assertion is true that all the dead are there, what
 41a greater good, O my judges, can there be than this? For if someone arriving at
 Hades, being liberated from these who pretend to be judges, should find those
 who are true judges, and who are said to judge there, *viz.* Minos and
 Rhadamanthus, Aeacus, and Triptolemus, and such others of the demigods as
 lived justly, would this be a vile journey? At what rate would you not purchase
 a conference with Orpheus and Musaeus, with Hesiod and Homer? I indeed
 b should be willing to die often, if these things are true. For to me the association
 will be admirable, when I shall meet with Palamedes, and Ajax the son of
 Telamon, and any other of the ancients who died through an unjust decision. The
 comparing my case with theirs will, I think, be no unpleasing employment to me.
 But the greatest pleasure will consist in passing my time there, as I have done
 here, in interrogating and exploring who among them is wise, and who fancies
 himself to be but is not so. What, O my judges, would not any one give for a
 c conference with him who led that mighty army against Troy, or with Ulysses, or
 Sisyphus, or ten thousand others, both men and women, that might be mentioned?
 For to converse and associate with these would be an inestimable felicity. For I
 should not be capitally condemned on this account by those that dwell there; since
 they are in other respects more happy than those that live here, and are for the rest
 of time immortal, if the assertions respecting these things are true.

d You, therefore, O my judges, ought to entertain good hopes with respect to
 death, and to be firmly persuaded of this one thing, that to a good man nothing is
 evil, neither while living nor when dead, and that his concerns are never neglected
 by the Gods. Nor is my present condition the effect of chance; but this is evident
 to me, that now to die, and be liberated from the affairs of life, is better for me.
 On this account the accustomed signal did not in this affair oppose me.