

# The irony in the philosophical ideologies of socrates

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Socrates' comparison of himself to the heroic Achilles is at first unusual and seemingly inappropriate. After all, he was an old man of seventy who was just about to be condemned to death, whereas Achilles was a glorious, strong youth whose courage and skill in battle was unparalleled. Achilles is often referred to as superior in being and served as the model warrior in the army. Thus, unlike Achilles, Socrates' heroic attributes are not focused around his physical characteristics, but rather his philosophical ideologies - centered on his revolutionary ideas about religion, human nature, and the afterlife. His heroism was not awarded because of his physical achievements, but rather his introduction of novel ideas and freethinking questions, along with his esteemed loyalty to the community.

Through his trial, apology and death, Socrates displays that his heroism and his commitment to his society are genuine and paramount priorities for him. Achilles' actions similarly revolve around his pursuit for glory and for his notion of loyalty to the society in which he participates in. He is forewarned by his mother that if he kills Hector his " fate will stand ready" and his immediate death will be inevitable. When he realizes this, he made little out of death and danger, and instead harbored a much greater fear that he would live the remainder of his life as a coward. Like Achilles, Socrates also strives for honor and the respect of his community. But as his duty as a philosopher, he brought forth many foreign thoughts that were hard to accept by the majority of citizens. Despite this, even when he was sentenced to death, Socrates did not abandon Athens.

He refuses to flee his home for many years and continued to show his unrelenting commitment by remaining in the city that had condemned him to death. Both Socrates and Achilles are grounded in their desires to do what they believe is correct and their readiness to die over this honor. Achilles is more devoted to a personal honor between him and the gods than in the morals that mortal men believe in. Socrates similarly declares, " Gentlemen, I am your very grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you;" he reasserts why needs to practice his philosophy even though he knows it may lead to his death.

Achilles and Socrates value their own idea of honor and duty to the gods over the Athenians' ideals. It is this passionate view of individual morality that leads to both of their eventual deaths. However, despite these apparent similarities, there are underlying ulterior messages in Socrates' comparison. Right after mentioning Achilles, Socrates notes his distinguished military service; Socrates knows that he is no Achilles, but he emphasizes his distinction in one significant way - he never deserts his post. The battles in which Socrates fought are in no way comparable to the Trojan War - they were either defeats or inconclusive - and yet, Socrates' most notable asset as a soldier was showcased more in his performance during retreats than for his offensive aptitude against the enemy. He epitomizes the non-Achillean, essential quality of obedience - not just in the literal Greek army as a soldier, but also in a democratic army as a citizen.

The initial ludicrousness of the comparison Socrates raises begins to take on an opposite tone, away from the similarity that Socrates is assumed to draw

but towards the subtler distinction between them. Achilles' brash and cruel method of warfare is a stark comparison to Socrates' pensive dignity. Socrates embarks on the delicate process of reevaluating the conventional reverence of Achilles. The question that Socrates poses about Achilles - "Surely you do not suppose that he thought about death and danger?" - is revealed to be ironic in light of the entire portrait of Achilles, particularly given his additional curse against death as portrayed in the *Odyssey*. Like Achilles, Socrates acknowledges his fate willingly even though it means death.

The interpretative conundrum arises when Socrates allusively compares himself with Achilles, to Achilles' disadvantage. Socrates begins a rebuke to the warlike virtue that has been amalgamated around Achilles. When Socrates implicitly reintroduces the analogy between himself and Achilles in the *Apology*, he invokes the Achilles of the *Odyssey*, when Achilles declares that "I would rather be tied to the soil as a serf...than be king of all these dead and destroyed." Achilles abandons his heroic stance and has decided that living by that heroic code is not enough if death is the consequence. Then, through this comparison, Socrates highlights that it is he who drops the Achillean stance and divulges that the answer to the rhetorical question "Surely you do not suppose that he thought about death and danger?" is "yes," in actuality.

Refusing to endorse Achilles' lamentation in Hades, Socrates vehemently professes an incontrovertible preference for death over slavery to the demands of the polis; Achilles as an example of how to live the philosophic

life is rejected. Achilles has many achievements and downfalls, and is very inconsistent in his heroism. He is animalistic and brutal when he mutilates Hector's body, but is compassionate when he returns the body to Priam. Juxtaposed to Achilles' irregularities, Socrates portrays an unceasing representation of heroic ideals. He does not change the ideals for which he stands for, and always remains faithful and supportive to Athens, even until the end.

Although the principles that Socrates upheld were in great opposition to the ideals of society, he consistently preached his philosophical views to satisfy his obligation to Athens, and to the gods. In these comparisons, a form of Socratic irony is revealed. Socrates knows that the jury would find it perverse that he, a meddlesome and maddening questioner, would reflect the legendary hero of Achilles. The irony then becomes apparent in the fact that, in many ways, Socrates is arguing that he is even more beneficial to society than Achilles himself.