

Free critical thinking on critical analysis of the apology of socrates by plato

[Life](#), [Death](#)



Socrates was an orator and philosopher whose primary interests were logic, ethics and epistemology. In Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, Plato recounts the speech that Socrates gave shortly before his death, during the trial in 399 BC in which he was charged with "corrupting the young, and by not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other daimonia that are novel" (24b). The name of the work itself is a bit of a misnomer; here, Socrates is not apologizing, but merely speaking in defense of his beliefs and actions - the word apology is used in the context of its original meaning. During this apology, Socrates attempts to explain himself and the decisions that led to his action, educating his audience in the philosophical questions he chooses to pose. Socrates does not try to avoid death in the trial; instead, his goal is to enlighten the public for the last time before his own passing.

Socrates was always fascinated with the solving of questions, both big and small; his approach was to use the Socratic method of inquiry, wherein he would break the problem down into several questions, and then systematically find the answers to each question in order to find the larger answer. It was a methodical, thorough and practical approach to knowledge that showcased his eternal quest for understanding. He says, "I only know that I know nothing"; this is indicative of his unending search for more and more knowledge (*Apology* 21d). According to him, philosophy starts by admitting that you are ignorant of the truth, which is what he does here. It is with this approach to philosophical questions and dilemmas - the use of Socratic irony - that Socrates chooses to engage with his audience and demonstrate why he did what he did.

The Socratic method of dialectical investigation utilized arguments to try and

determine ethics and truth. Two techniques were primarily used by Socrates: first, he would create a hypothesis, then he would investigate any potential conflicts with that hypothesis. Assumptions and presumptions would be challenged in order to discover what was true. Socrates focused on consistency and coherency, valuing thought above all else. His primary epistemology was asking questions, developing hypotheses, and testing them to see if the evidence supported them. In terms of metaphysics, Socrates, like Plato, subscribed to the "Theory of Forms," in which there were unachievable forms of perfection that could be placed above whatever we might find in the tangible, real world.

Socrates, for the most part, values the integrity of society, and feels as though a group of people coming together to form a community should be respected by honoring the social contract. At the same time, there are aspects of the self that are more important than a communal whole, and a society must be made up of individuals that follow the principles shared by the whole. One should not be forced to behave in a manner inconsistent with their beliefs; an ideal society is comprised of individuals who all subscribe to the same philosophies and attitudes as all others in said society. It is only then that justice can be really served.

Socrates' approach to the trial is admirable; instead of expressing panic or desperation at the prospect of his life ending, the man instead maintains his calm and simply, effectively explains his position. He presents himself as the ideal philosopher, being unwavering in his justification for his actions and wishing to inspire his audience. Using his own use of rhetoric and his Socratic principles, he breaks down discussions he has with characters such as the

Delphic oracle, Meletus, and more to elucidate his ideas.

The beginning of Socrates' argument relies on the aforementioned acknowledgement of Socratic irony – the most philosophical man is the one who admits his ignorance, and is able to point out the ignorance of others. When the oracle of Delphi told Chaerephon that Socrates was the wisest of all men, the philosopher chose to go on a journey to deal with this paradox; he knew he was ignorant, so he could not be wiser than everyone else. To that end, he talked to politicians, poets and craftsmen, coming to the ineffable conclusion that none of them knew what they were talking about either. At that end, Socrates claims he began to see himself as a representative of the oracle's words; instead of pretending to know a great deal, he chose to profess his ignorance and be honest with himself about it (23e). To that end, he was able to act as himself and maintain his integrity. During the trial, Socrates holds everyone else to the same standard; when he talks about Meletus, his accuser, he calls him out on not actually caring about what he professes to care about – namely, the charges against Socrates. While Socrates has found wisdom in abandoning pretensions about knowledge, Meletus is portrayed as a man who pretends to care or know about what he knows, when in fact he does not.

Socrates had very specific ideas regarding what constituted 'the good life.' To him, the most important value a person has is virtue, and the good life is spent looking for the Good. This was known as the love of wisdom. Socrates had little regard for worldly affairs, and the material or pleasurable things that many people might consider to contribute to 'the good life'; instead, he thought that the best thing to do in life is to " pursue the love of wisdom,"

instead of " money, and reputation, and public honor" (Apology 29d-30b). He defended this by living the philosophy, and emphasizing certain virtues that were purported to be the best things that humanity could offer itself. By eschewing the search for wealth and instead growing as people, Socrates attempted to build a community of better individuals.

Socrates firmly believed that a higher order should be followed when conducting one's life; whenever divine authority conflicts with human authority, one must follow divine authority first. " Gentlemen, I am your grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you; and as long as I draw breath and have my faculties I shall never stop practicing philosophy" (Apology). He feels he has a duty, as a philosopher, to constantly question and probe the world around him to find answers, since his professed ignorance frees him from pretending he already knows said answers.

All of these arguments comment heavily on the charges against Socrates; in essence, people hated his questioning and argumentation, as well as the perception that he was insulting those whom he was interrogating. Socrates lamented the focus on material wealth and power, at the expense of eschewing internal exploration and philosophy. " Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?" (Apology). Here, he is lambasting his audience (and the people of Athens) for not working toward the greatest good, which is the study of self and the world around them; this is the reason for his interrogating, and the very thing they are punishing him

for. If he has to be irritating and annoying to his peers, so be it; he will not stop until he improves the lives of the people he lives with, “ and all day long I will never cease to settle here, there and everywhere, rousing, persuading, and reproving every one of you” (Apology 30e). This is a bold statement that proves his use of his defense to educate the people of Athens as to their own problems.

In his final argument, when the jury votes to execute Socrates, his stoicism regarding his impending death plays into his central thesis. According to Socrates, there are two kinds of death: death as annihilation (you go to sleep and feel and experience nothing more) and death as transmigration (where you have a soul which goes somewhere else). Either definition is defended by Socrates; the annihilation should be looked forward to like you would finally going to sleep, and transmigration would simply allow him to talk to other great figures like Homer and Odysseus and learn from their wisdom. He notes that it might have been possible for him to save his life by begging the court’s mercy and appealing to them. However, he did not do this; this was not out of ignorance or ineffectiveness in his approach, but he wanted to be honest and truthful about his opinions – namely, that the jury and those who were charging him were afraid of his criticism. To Socrates, it is better to die as an honest man who is unafraid of his convictions than to live having sacrificed them. Because of that, he wants to make an example of himself to the jury, proving a life lived honestly is one which brings greater peace. In the end, Socrates even transcends their own hatred of him by wishing them well; he feels that, if you are a good man, you have nothing to fear in the life or the afterlife. He does not begrudge or hate his accusers and

merely wishes to teach others to place the human good over the materialism and consumerism that plagues his peers. His last words are, " Well, now it is time to be off, I to die and you to live; but which of us has the happier prospect is unknown to anyone but God" (42a).

When Socrates accepted the orders of the state and took poison to carry out his death sentence, he made a very calculated and thought-out decision to obey the state of Athens, despite his own personal opinion that Athens was not a fit democracy. Despite having the chance to get out through bribery, he chose to stay instead. According to Socrates, he had an obligation to the ' social contract' that he made with the society in which he lived - he was allowed to live amongst them in exchange for the giving up of certain aspects of autonomy to the state. While self-interest is good, it does not trump the Socratic principles of staying true to one's source of law and education. His death sentence, to him, was the unfortunate but understandable result of living in a society that oversaw its peers. Despite his innocence, and the belief that the Athenian government was in desperate need of change, he still abided by its rules; he believed that one can change the system from within, but you must still adhere to the decisions that society makes.

In conclusion, Socrates' defense at the trial, portrayed in Plato's Apology, was simply another platform by which he espoused his philosophies about the virtue of thinking, self-improvement, and acting as a part of a greater whole of civilization. He was punished and put to death for asking too many questions and ruffling feathers, when in fact he was simply wishing to point out the ignorance of his peers (which he also shares). The principle of

Socratic irony, wherein people are most philosophical when they admit they know nothing, was something that Socrates was trying to get other people to admit; despite their professed knowledge, they truly were ignorant, and so they were learning nothing by not reconciling this attitude. While the trial did not save his life, Socrates did not care - his intent was to show people the meaning of holding to the decisions of their community, as well as demand greater examination of themselves.