

Defence, pride and prejudice

Philosophy



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Ramakrishna Surampudi 17 May Defence, Pride and Prejudice Socrates and Augustus were in their seventies at the time of Apology and Res Gestae respectively. Both had a desire to be remembered by posterity. Apology as well as Res Gestae were sort of public relations moves. While the former readily deserves to be labeled propaganda, applying the same word for Apology may cause a bit of uneasiness especially because of the respect we have for Socrates and his wisdom. Nonetheless, it is no sin to see propaganda in Apology since its chief motive was to impress and influence the listeners. As for objectivity, there is no way we can verify the claims made by Augustus in Res Gestae. But common sense tells us that some facts could have been suppressed or exaggerated. In the trial of Socrates, we believe it was motivated by spite and prejudice (of those to whom Socrates' teachings caused embarrassment) and, therefore, our sympathies are with the great philosopher. Still, the fact remains that Apology is in first person narrative which means it is one-sided and so there is an equal possibility for lack of objectivity, though the degree may differ. However, there is little scope for suppression of facts or exaggeration in Socrates' statement because it is primarily based on reasoning unlike Res Gestae which is a self-satisfied account of 'facts' or things done.

Res Gestae states that Augustus, after the civil wars, transferred the republic 'from his power to the power of the senate and the people'. It sounds great to hear about a ruler who let the spirit of democracy flourish thousands of years ago. But history tells us that, contrary to modern day republics, the senate and the people, as such, were never allowed to be binding on the king and his decisions. Res Gestae does not tell us that tribunes could veto laws passed by the senate and Augustus was 'tribune-for-life'. It was <https://assignbuster.com/defence-pride-and-prejudice/>

therefore a masqueraded republic. The hypocrisy of the so-called ‘ principate’ is evident in Augustus, in 27 B. C., being voted a large military command for a period of ten years and in the institution of ‘ *impeium maius*’.

Res Gestae informs us that Augustus was known for his ‘ courage, clemency, justice and piety’. It is conveniently ignored that thousands of people were crucified during his reign. Augustus claims having brought peace to Spain and Gaul by conquering them, but we know that this peace must have been preceded by a lot of bloodshed. Nor would have Augustus rid the sea of pirates without the use of violence. But it is too much to expect the second half of the fact to be recorded. He was proud of the gladiatorial shows and beast hunts that he had patronized. In what looks like an accomplishment, certainly, there should have been at least a few, even in those days, who saw the ugliness and the inhuman side of those activities.

Res Gestae lists achievements in which Augustus took great pride. The pride sometimes, as in the insertion of his name in the hymn of *Salii* seems to border on megalomania and narcissism. In *Apology*, what we see apparently is Socrates’ humility when he states that he knows nothing. But this statement was preceded by a mention of a prophecy by the oracle at Delphi that he was the wisest of all men. Thus, in a very subtle manner, Socrates implies that his interlocutors were more ignorant than he. The flavor of Augustus’ self-assessment may be very different from that of Socrates, but a sense of pride was a common factor. Socrates’ assertion that he had no particular wisdom or special knowledge makes it hard to perceive the underlying pride.

Strictly speaking, Augustus was admittedly a great ruler even without *Res*
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Gestae. It was less out of a need and more out of anxiety that his achievements might be surpassed by those of later rulers. For Socrates, the defence was a matter of life and death, though he was not very much worried about it. It is an irony that a man like Socrates had to face charges of impiety and that his logical argument did not find favor with the judges. It is understandable that Socrates' questioning further irritated the judges instead of persuading them. What stands out is that Socrates never seemed to make an attempt to come round to the viewpoint of the judges and to understand their apprehensions. His argument that no one does evil knowingly and willingly is difficult to buy. His analogy of horse-trainer also looks like begging the question, because grooming horses and training humans cannot be equated. Hence, in spite of the rationality of his ideas, Socrates' argument fails to beget the desired result because of the derogatory scorn that dominates his expression.

Defence is a self-centered activity and it is bound to be clouded by prejudice. Neither an emperor nor a philosopher can be an exception to it.