

Three important lessons: plato's apology

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While most would probably reach the conclusion that Socrates was asking for forgiveness for his transgressions, a careful analysis of the text and knowledge of Socrates' life and what he stood for would yield different conclusions. It is the argument of this paper that Socrates was not begging for forgiveness for his transgressions – although he might have certainly hoped that he would be spared the death sentence. In truth, Socrates was imparting a lesson that was central to his work and to his beliefs. His apology was a lecture on the triumph of knowledge over ignorance and he was beseeching his listeners to discard old and traditional beliefs and embrace modern intellectual development.

The background of the Apology is that Socrates is being charged with the corruption of the youth and disrespect towards the Gods. He begins by saying that “ The task is not an easy one; I quite understand the nature of it. And so leaving the event with God, in obedience to the law I will now make my defense.” (Plato, quoted in Biffle, 34) He confronts his accuser Meletus and demonstrates exactly why and how the charges against him are false. However, despite his use of logic to defend himself, he is still found guilty and sentenced to die.

It is clear throughout the text that Socrates wants to emphasize that he will counter his accuser's lies and accusations with wisdom. This is the first lesson: the importance of wisdom. He also wishes to emphasize that it is his wisdom and knowledge that make him persecuted, but this wisdom and knowledge will be of much use to the city of Athens. Therefore, instead of using pathos, or arousing pity, he was appealing to the logic of the crowd.

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Instead of beseeching the people to spare his life, he reasoned with them – making logical and coherent arguments with the end in view of convincing them that they would be better off with him alive than with him dead. To quote:

For if you kill me you will not easily find a successor to me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by God; and the state is a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. You will not easily find another like me, and therefore I would advise you to spare me. (ibid, 38)

It is not just what he said but the manner it was argued that gives rise to the second lesson: the importance of telling the truth. There are also excerpts to suggest that he preferred to give proof and evidence, rather than make bare assertions. This is discernible in sentences like “ I can give you convincing evidence of what I say, not words only but what you value far more, actions (ibid, 41)” and “ Why, indeed, except for the sake of truth and justice, and because they know that I am speaking the truth and that Meletus is a liar. (ibid, 43)”

The third lesson is his take on corruption. Socrates was a moral man who believed in God and Justice. An important point he makes is that riches and wealth should flow from goodness and justice, instead of goodness and

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justice flowing from wealth. " 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?"

In sum, this paper demonstrated that Socrates' apology was not really an apology in the contemporary sense of the word, but rather an explanation, and a platform for further elaborating on his agenda to bring knowledge and logic to the center of Athenian life, that was still at the time, preoccupied with idolatry and old traditions. The significance of this is that it ties back to what we understand of Socrates, from whom the Socratic method originated.