

24.01 Classics of Western Philosophy

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I. Plato

Lecture 1. The *Apology*

1. *Socrates and Plato*. Plato began as a disciple of Socrates, and the early dialogues probably describe the thoughts of Socrates himself, a figure about whom little is independently known; in later dialogues Socrates becomes the mouthpiece for Plato's own philosophical views and arguments. The *Apology* presents Socrates' defense at his trial in 399 BC, where he was ultimately found guilty of corrupting the minds of the young. He was sentenced to death. Plato thereafter abandoned his own political career, and took up philosophy, establishing the first university, the Academy in Athens.

2. *The charges*. Socrates is 'guilty of engaging in inquiries into things beneath the earth and in the heavens, of making the weaker argument appear the stronger, and of teaching others these same things' (II.19); 'guilty of corrupting the youth, and of believing not in the gods whom the state believes in, but in other new divinities' (XI.24); he is 'a complete atheist' (XIV.26). The first charge arises from stereotypes about philosophers more generally, who included Presocratic cosmologists, and Sophists, who were paid teachers of arguments (X.24). (Socrates is neither a cosmologist, nor a Sophist.) The charge about divinities and atheism is contradictory (XV.27).

3. *The real reason for the charges*. In his incessant search for wisdom, Socrates' questionings of his fellow citizens inevitably reveal their ignorance; and people do not like being made to look like fools. The oracle at Delphi (IV.21) had said that no-one was wiser than Socrates. Sure only of his own ignorance, Socrates gradually discovers the god's true meaning: most people think they have wisdom, when they don't; but Socrates alone knows he lacks wisdom (VI.21, IX.23). (Note, though, that the 'corrupted' young people probably included Alcibiades, who indeed became an impious and treacherous general.)

4. *Socrates' examination of Miletus*.

(i) Under Socrates' interrogation, Miletus says that nearly everyone improves the young, but only one corrupts. Socrates says this is as unlikely as thinking that everyone knows how to improve horses, and only a few do not (XII.24-XII).

(ii) Miletus agrees that it is better to live among good citizens than bad; Socrates asks why anyone would willingly turn their fellow-citizens bad (XIII.25-6). The argument has a structure something like this:

- Premise 1. Anyone who is evil is disposed to injure.
- Premise 2. No-one voluntarily makes anyone disposed to injure.
- Conclusion. No-one voluntarily makes anyone evil.

(How would you assess this argument?) The argument here has connections with a famous Socratic theme, developed in the *Meno*, that no-one knowingly does wrong. Socrates draws the conclusion that either he did not corrupt anyone, or he did so involuntarily—in which case he is deserving of education rather than punishment.

5. *Justice and death.* Socrates imagines someone asking, ‘Are you not ashamed of leading a life that is likely to end in a death sentence?’. He responds that it is a great mistake to think that ‘a man of any worth at all ought to think about anything but whether he is acting justly or unjustly, and as a good or a bad man would act’ (XVI.28). He compares himself to a soldier in battle. There seem to be two ideas here. (i) You should act justly *no matter what the consequences*. On this way of thinking, *even if* the consequences were very evil, that should not enter into the mind of someone deciding how to act. (ii) You should choose something *not known to be evil*, over something *known to be evil*. ‘I do know very well that it is evil and disgraceful to do an unjust act...I will never do what I know to be evil, and shrink in fear from what I do not know to be good or evil’ (XVII.29). Socrates ends this part of his defense by insisting that, even if acquitted, he will not change his ways: ‘As long as I have breath and strength I will not give up philosophy and exhorting you and declaring the truth to every one of you whom I meet.’

6. *A defense of his fellow Athenians?* Socrates is arguing, not in his own defense, but in defense of his fellow citizens, who risk making a mistake and condemning an innocent man. If they put him to death they will *harm themselves more than they harm him* (XVIII.30-31); and in two ways. First, doing wrong is harming oneself (to ‘try to put a man to death unjustly’ is a ‘much greater evil’ than to be killed). Second, with Socrates gone, Athens will be a large, well-bred but sluggish horse, deprived of the humble gadfly who performs the vital function of waking it up.

7. *The verdict and penalty.* Socrates has been found guilty (by 281 votes to 220). His accusers recommend the death penalty. Socrates has an opportunity to ask for an alternative penalty. ‘What is a suitable reward to be given to a poor benefactor who requires leisure to exhort you?’ He suggests: free meals at the prytaneum—a traditional reward for Olympic athletes (XXVI.37). If the penalty must be a fine, he proposes one of 30 minae, funded by friends (including Plato). He rules out the penalty of keeping peace, refraining from his questions: for ‘no greater good can happen to a man than to discuss human excellence every day... *an unexamined life is not worth living*’ (XXVIII.38). But he is sentenced to death. His response:

My friends, I think that it is a much harder thing to escape from wickedness than from death, for wickedness is swifter than death. And now I, who am old and slow, have been overtaken by the slower pursuer; and my accusers, who are clever and swift, have been overtaken by the swifter pursuer—wickedness. And now I shall go away, sentenced by you to death; they will go away, sentenced by truth to wickedness and injustice.

8. *What is death?* (XXXI-XXXIII, 40-42) It is a good: for his inner prophetic guide at no point discouraged him away from this path. Reflection reveals death must be either oblivion, or a journey to be with the ‘true judges’. But he ends on a note of uncertainty: ‘We must go away, I to die, and you to live. Which is better is known to the god alone’.