

Plato's Apology

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I. Context for the *Apology*

According to the usual story, a real break in the history of Greek philosophy, which we have seen in our last lecture began in 6th C Ionia, occurs with Socrates (469-399), who "brought philosophy down out of the heavens into the market place." In other words, instead of the study of the nature of physical processes, Socrates introduces **ethics**, the reflection on principles of human behavior (as opposed to social science, the study of human behavior in order to arrive at predictive and explanatory generalizations about that behavior). In a formula: ethics: what **should** people do, *in principle*; social science: what **do** people do, *in fact*.

Since Socrates never wrote anything, almost all we know of him comes from three main sources: a) a rather moralizing portrait by the writer Xenophon, who makes Socrates out to be a font of conventional morality; b) a satiric if not malicious portrait by the comic playwright Aristophanes of Socrates as a double-talking charlatan; c) the dialogues of Plato (428-347), which make him into the patron saint of philosophers.

In the early dialogues Socrates appears as a man who wanders about Athens cross-examining people he runs into on their claims to knowledge about basic moral virtues: courage, piety, etc. If the dialogues are accurate, virtually no one could stand up to him, certainly none of the ordinary citizens (although a few of the sophists are portrayed as holding their own). Not surprisingly, this made him quite unpopular with his targets, especially as a crowd of young nobles (rich idlers in the eyes of the solid hoplite citizens--playboys, dilettantes, amateurs!) would show up to enjoy the sport. (Remember the social structure of 5th C Athens: rich landowners [aristos]; independent farmers [hoplites/limited democrats]; urban rich [traders, manufacturers]; urban masses [rowers/democrats].)

Unfortunately for Socrates, although he had a distinguished military career, he hung with the wrong crowd. In the aftermath of the crushing defeat of Athens by the Spartans, Socrates' friendship with, and reputation as the teacher of, Critias (one of the Thirty tyrants installed by Sparta) and Alcibiades (all-around evil genius and perhaps traitor) proved fatal, as he was tried and put to death on charges of introducing false gods and corrupting the youth. Plato's *Apology* tells the story of the trial.

In essence, the Athenians thought Socrates was a **sophist**, and Plato's dialogues set out to distinguish Socrates from the sophists. We don't know much about the sophists in their own words. Their aristocratic enemies, like Plato, say that sophists were traveling teachers, who sold their services to rich fathers by promising to teach their sons political skills: rhetoric, public relations, etc. According to legend, some sophists were so skilled they could "make the weaker case the stronger," that is, upset conventional moral order. This charge could be a clue to a positive interpretation: in subjecting conventional morality to rational scrutiny, the sophists were in a sense "Enlightenment" figures. For example, the most famous sophist, Protagoras, was both agnostic regarding the gods and humanist in morals, two principles that resurfaced in the 18th C.

Sophistic investigations further destabilized a sensitive, turbulent Athenian culture. In the imperial heyday of mid 5th century, Athens was quite cosmopolitan, with sailors coming to port every day with stories of strange other cultures. Thus a lively debate, which the sophists jumped into, began on the relation of *nomos*

(law/custom) and *physis* (nature). Did we do things because they're the naturally right way to do things, or is it just the Athenian way, sanctioned simply by habit? A harmless intellectual game for rich idlers when Athens was on top of its game, but when the Spartans had humiliatingly defeated them, it became another story entirely. Maybe our defeat was punishment for letting these moral degenerates and smooth-talkers have the run of the town? A little house-cleaning was in order, and Socrates was a prime candidate.

Whatever the view from the streets, after Socrates' death, the young Plato, himself one of those rich idlers (in an inside joke, we read how he "was sick" the day of Socrates' trial), sensing how Athenian politics was a blood sport, wrote a series of dialogues with Socrates as the main character. These are usually seen as fairly accurate, although perhaps idealizing, portraits of the historical Socrates and his typical *modus operandi*. In each one, Socrates shows the self-contradictory stances of conventional answers to moral problems. However, none of these "early" dialogues reach a definitive answer about the moral issue at stake. Thus, according to Plato's portrait, Socrates never had a positive doctrine; in fact the oracle at Delphi, as the *Apology* puts it, says only that "no one is wiser than Socrates" not that Socrates is wise. Socrates puts it like this: "my only wisdom is knowing that I don't know." This paradoxically self-reflective stance is called, interchangeably, "Socratic wisdom" or "Socratic ignorance." Perhaps the best we can say of the Socratic dialogues is that they provide a dramatic portrait of **Socratic philosophy as the radical self-questioning of cultural presuppositions**. (Here is the questioning side of doing philosophy.)

II. The *Apology* as a dramatic work

The *Apology* is not a treatise. It does not consist of hypothesis, evidence, argument, conclusion, and so on--the form philosophy took after Aristotle. It presents itself as the speech of Socrates at his trial. It is then, in a sense, a drama, a philosophical work of art. We must be attentive to this fact. Socrates is not--at least not straightforwardly--Plato's "mouthpiece." Plato has created a character named Socrates and put into that character's mouth certain statements. The meaning of the *Apology* comes from the total scene, **Socrates' statements in dramatic context**. In other dialogues, the meaning comes from **the interaction of Socrates with his interlocutors**.

In the case of the *Apology*, we have seven main "characters" implied in the "action":

1) Socrates, of course. 2) The jury, 501 adult male property-owning native-born citizens of Athens. 3) Aristophanes, the comic playwright who had lampooned Socrates in the *Clouds*, a popular comedy, as a double-talking charlatan. 4) The sophists. 5) Meletus, Socrates' main accuser. 6) The Delphic oracle. 7) Socrates' *daimon*, his inner voice.

III. Structure of the *Apology*

1st speech

17a-18a: Prologue

18a-19a: Accusations

19a-d: Old Prejudices against Socrates

19d-21a: Images of Sophistry

21a-24b: The Saying of the Oracle

24b-28a: The Accusations of Meletus

28a-34b: Socrates' unpopularity

34b-35e: Socrates' refusal to plead

2nd speech

35e-38b: Socrates' punishment

3rd speech

38c-42a: Socrates' judgment of the jury

IV. Three Themes: Sophistry, Ignorance, Death

We only have time to consider three seemingly unpleasant themes in the *Apology*: sophistry, ignorance, and death. But I say "seemingly" since philosophy presents, in Hegel's terms, an "inverted" (or even "perverted") world, one contrary to common sense. It may turn out that the last two are not all that bad to Socrates!

A. Sophistry

Or, more accurately, the Platonic image of sophistry. At 19d-21a, Socrates claims, in attempting to distinguish himself from the sophists to whom he has become assimilated in the Athenian popular consciousness, that sophists claim to be experts about human excellence and can make humans excellent, like horse trainers claim to be able to make horses excellent. Socrates denies having this kind of expert knowledge about human excellence, claiming only to have a certain type of wisdom. The Greek words are important: expertise = *episteme* or science; wisdom = *sophia*. This is a long standing battle: philosophers trying to distinguish themselves both from priest/poets (divine inspiration) and from engineers/scientists (manipulators of properties of things). In this case, the things to be studied and manipulated by scientific engineers (sophists) are human beings. (I claimed earlier that from an admittedly reductionistic philosophical viewpoint, priests and poets are also engineers of human emotions, like the Wizard of Oz, instilling fear, awe, guilt, etc., through long practice at refining their mumbo-jumbo to "push people's buttons".)

This is a complex issue. It's not that sophists or other human engineers can't train people. Discipline, military and otherwise, shows they can. Training is the instillation of a one-to-one command -- response relation. The trainer installs trigger points: knee-jerk reactions as we call them. It is perfect repetition, difference only in matter (time and space, number) but not in form. In a perfectly disciplined military **unit** (note the emphasis on identity) all the actions are essentially the same, even though "different" people do them (but of course, at the limit, then they're not really different in regard to the specified action!). The condition for this perfect repetition is the removal of individuality and making the individual into a team member: boot camp.

We can't be humanists and bemoan this loss of precious individuality, as if it were the "natural" condition, our birthright as free persons which is taken away from us, etc. The point is to analyze the social machine that produces either disciplined response or flexible judgment. What Socrates is complaining about in terms of what he calls "virtue" or "true human excellence" is the **simplification** involved in producing perfect repetition. To be a good citizen, Socrates claims, one cannot be trained into disciplined repetition, one cannot be simplified, but one must be **complexified**. To have virtue is to have judgment, to be able to respond to the new, the unpredictable, or to situations that are too complex for words and can only be responded to aesthetically, by feel or touch, in both the literal and figurative senses of those words.

To have such a knack, one's brain must be coaxed into exploring complex resonance zones, where new patterns are able to form: self-organization. Discipline is precisely the channeling of response, the installation of huge identity attractors: reception of orders from above. Socrates of course did not have complexity theory studies of the brain w/ which to explain himself. His vocabulary is that of *phronesis* and *arete*: practical wisdom or judgment, and virtue or excellence. At root, we could say, Socrates wants to distinguish the good hoplite

(simplified, disciplined predictability) from the good citizen (complex, flexible judgment). This will not make him popular, as we will see.

B. Ignorance

Socrates claims to have only a "human wisdom" (20d), not the "more than human wisdom" (20e) of the sophists. Yet he also, famously, claims to know that he is not wise (21b). What's going on here?

Socrates tells the story at 21a-24b of the oracle's saying that "no one is wiser than Socrates." Since Socrates knows he is not wise, he at first doubts the oracle and sets out to test it. He will try to find someone wiser than he is. He first finds someone who **appears** to be wise to many, and who accepts this attribute: he too thinks he is wise. Under examination, however, the supposedly wise man turns out not to be wise: he is revealed as **unwise**. This **unveiling** of ignorance on the part of the supposedly wise leads to hatred of Socrates. He then reflects that he is wiser than this interlocutor, because he doesn't pretend to a knowledge that he doesn't possess. In other words, Socrates' wisdom lies in acknowledging his own ignorance. After a systematic survey of Athens, including the politicians, poets, and craftsmen, Socrates concludes that the oracle was right after all and that human wisdom is worth "little or nothing," and that the wisest is one who recognizes this worthlessness.

Socrates is here insisting, it seem to me, on the need for judgment, that is, complexified flexible response to new and/or complex circumstances, as the hallmark of human wisdom. Such judgment is not verbally explicable, is not able to be put into formulae, because it is precisely the ability to step out of formulae, to improvise and create. One can only have a retrospective verbal explication of already formulated rules. What happens is this. Culture is the sedimentation of judgment. That means that past improvisations, past judgments become codified for transmission. But really all that can be put into words are empty formulae. The real work comes in the application of these. When they're applied, on the spot in the crisis or the workshop or on the stage, they step down from the status of formulae and become only a rules of thumb, hints. But this sort of activity--nonverbal, aesthetic--was *déclassé* in Athens. Masters gave commands: they ruled with the voice, by formulae. Even though they could do things, craftsmen and workers couldn't explain themselves. And what they do is not to command matter, to impose a transcendent form on chaotic matter, but to coax forth implicit organization by pushing a material system toward a threshold they recognize aesthetically in the feel of the grain of the wood or the mixture of the clay or the texture of the marble.

C. Death

Socrates' attitude toward death is important to the history of philosophy. Death is not to be feared, he says, but the fear of death, and the disgraceful actions it may entail, is to be resisted and scorned. He first gives the example of Achilles the warrior, then of himself as a soldier, then of himself as servant of the god. There are important differences here though: Achilles the warrior rushes forward, the soldier stays put with his comrades. Beyond this difference, which he does not mention, Socrates says that the fear of death presupposes a knowledge claim -- that one knows it to be evil. Socrates rather says that he has no adequate knowledge of the underworld. This is crucial. Socrates does not practice philosophy as a way of bringing his fellow citizens in line with a superhuman knowledge of the total universe, including the disposition of the soul after death. Such is hidden to Socrates and to all philosophers.

We must bear this in mind when reading the *Phaedo*. The so-called proofs for the immortality of the soul contained therein are, in the dramatic context of the dialogue, nothing but sops to the buffoons Simmias and Cebes, magic tricks to calm their fears. As "proofs," they are based on precisely the sort of metaphysical speculation Socrates is here abjuring. Rather, such a belief is self-manipulation judged for its practical effects on living behavior. The "proofs" are incantations that will calm the fears of Simmias and Cebes, as Socrates judges that these are the type of words that will appeal to Pythagoreans. (Remember, it's Plato the author putting these words in Socrates' mouth: the meaning of the dialogue comes from the total dramatic context: Socrates

and the interlocutors in that particular time and place.) For himself, as reported in the *Apology*, Socrates will prefer to believe that death might be a blessing (40c ff), because of the practical effect such a stance will have on him here and now.