

The *Apology* and *Crito*

1. Background on Socrates and Plato

(a) *Socrates* (469–399 BCE)

i. His mother may have been a midwife, his father a stonemason; he himself had a wife (Xanthippe) and several children. Socrates served in the Athenian army during the Peloponnesian War. Other than this, he never left Athens and its vicinity.

ii. Most famous as a barefoot, unwashed, snub-nosed, bug-eyed, incessantly inquisitive man. Although he never wrote anything down, he attracted quite a following. One of those followers was Plato.

(b) *Plato* (427–347 BCE)

i. From an aristocratic family and probably expected to go in to politics; instead, he turned to philosophy. After Socrates' death, Plato spent about a decade abroad, perhaps studying with members of the Pythagorean "cult" in Italy. In the 380s, he returned to Athens and founded a school: the Academy.

ii. At the Academy, Plato taught philosophy, but probably also mathematics and political science. It was something of a think tank. Many bright young intellectuals passed through his school, including Aristotle.

Although Socrates never wrote a word, there is no doubt that he existed. There is plenty of doubt, however, about what he thought. The main source of evidence for his views include a historian (Xenophon), a playwright (Aristophanes), and a philosopher (Plato). In fact, in most of Plato's dialogues, Socrates is the protagonist. But was Plato just using Socrates as his mouthpiece?

II. General remarks on the *Apology*

(a) The title: 'apology' is from the Greek 'apologia' which means defense. (As you surely noted, Socrates is not especially apologetic.)

(b) Ancient Athenian legal procedure: Athens was a "direct democracy." All "citizens," i.e., the adult (>age 20) males who owned land and weren't slaves, had a vote. A smaller group (>age 30) served in the judicial court. The prosecution and defense each make speeches; the jury (there were no judges, in the contemporary sense) votes on the verdict; the prosecution and defense each propose penalties; the jury votes on the penalty.

(c) The *Apology* is likely an early work, possibly one of Plato's first (although can't date it precisely). It is not plausibly an historically correct representation of the trial, but may capture something of Socrates' ideas and personality.

III. Characteristic Socratic Theses

Socrates realized that his defense was not only a response to the specific charges; those he was apt to flatly deny. He was on trial also for his way of life. His challenge was to show the jury that his life was a life of virtue, and so could not be a basis for charges of impiety and corruption.

a) Care of the soul is of primary importance.
Apology: 29e-30b, 36c *Crito*: 47e-48b

b) In considering what course of action to follow, one should only consider what is right/wrong, just/unjust.
Apology: 28b *Crito*: 48c-d

c) Virtue is a form of moral knowledge (a skill in practical reasoning?). Philosophical inquiry is morally therapeutic.

Apology: 30a-31a, 36c-37a, 38a
Corollary: The unexamined life is not worth living.

- d) Socrates knows that he does not have knowledge, and that is all.
Apology: 20c, 20e, 21d, 23b
- e) No one can harm a good person.
Apology: 30c-d, 41c-d
- f) No one deliberately does harm [injustice].
Apology: 25d-26a

IV. Connections between the theses

1. *Why is the care of the soul of primary importance? What else might matter?*

The ordinary person might think that satisfying one's desires is of primary importance and the route to happiness. In contrast, Socrates maintains that the care of the soul is of utmost importance because a cared for soul is the basis of happiness and virtue. (Why think this? Isn't satisfaction of desire what makes us happy?)

2. *Why, in determining how to act, is acting justly the only consideration that matters?*

Injustice harms the soul. One who behaves badly will harm what is most valuable. (How does injustice or wrongdoing harm the soul?)

3. *Why does doing philosophy matter? Why would Socrates rather die than stop doing philosophy?*

If virtue is (moral) knowledge, then one is virtuous *if and only if* they have (moral) knowledge. If we grant that philosophical inquiry is a route to moral knowledge, then this will be a basis for achieving virtue, and so will be morally therapeutic. A corollary of this is that the unexamined life is not worth living, because it will be a life without knowledge, and so without virtue. (Is the unexamined life really *not worth living*???)

4. *What does Socrates mean when he claims not to have knowledge?*

Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is one of his most distinctive claims, and yet it seems paradoxical, given what we have just considered.

- Socrates seems make some further claims to knowledge (eg., at 29b he says, "I do know that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, be he god or man).
- Socrates does suggest that he has virtue, but if virtue = moral knowledge, and he does not have moral knowledge, how can he have virtue?
- Suggestion for answer? Socrates claims to have human knowledge or human wisdom (eg., 20d), which he emphasizes is an awareness of how little he does know. If we allow that, correlated with human knowledge, there is a kind of human virtue (which is less than divine virtue and divine knowledge), then we can say that Socrates has this sort of human virtue. So: human knowledge, like human virtue, is fallible and consists largely in a kind of humility...Socrates has both, but lacks divine knowledge and divine virtue. (How is virtue connected to humility?)

5. *Obviously people harm good people all the time! How can Socrates deny this?*

This seems surprising...but on Socrates' view a person becomes good by virtue of having knowledge, moreover, knowledge is something one can never be deprived of once one has it. Beat me, rob me, etc., and my knowledge remains. If the soul is of primary importance, if (moral) knowledge is what matters for the soul's well-being, then no one can ever harm one with respect to that which really counts for happiness.

6. *But surely there are bad people who intentionally do wrong: torturers, serial killers....even people who steal or don't stop at crosswalks!*

Consider again the thesis that virtue is (moral) knowledge. It follows from this that one who lacks virtue, lacks moral knowledge, ie., is ignorant. But action on the basis of ignorance is not deliberate. If doing harm is a failure of virtue, it must also be a failure of knowledge, and so be involuntary. (We will consider this in greater depth in connection with the *Meno*.)

V. Socrates' defense

By engaging in philosophical inquiry, Socrates is living a virtuous life, and encouraging others to do the same; he is hardly corrupting the youth, in fact, he is the one most concerned with the state of their souls, and their virtue. And if he has done wrong, he has done so unwillingly, unintentionally.

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