

Transliteration of Socrates' Defense

Abridged from Benjamin Jowett's translation of Apology by Plato

THE CHARGE: The evil man Socrates has corrupted the morals of our youth with his doctrine of debating anything and everything in our City. He denigrates the gods of the State and substitutes a subversive system of beliefs which make the worse appear better. [In order to prevent the descent of our society into anarchy, we ask the court to condemn him for treason.]

SOCRATES' DEFENSE:

Denies the charges, corrects the record

City of Athens, you shall hear the whole truth from me, spoken in the same improvisational manner that many of you have already heard either in public places or in private interviews.

The prosecutors charge me with the false accusations and slander of nameless witnesses, whom I cannot examine. Despite the unfairness of the premise, I will attempt to address the origin of rumors swirling about me and show their falsehood.

There is a play authored by Aristophanes about a curious man named Socrates, who is given to curious speculations and pretensions. I categorically disavow any studies assigned to me in that play. I have no conceit about being a teacher and have taken no payment for such a service.

As to my having some sort of "wisdom," there is some truth to that reputation. Simply put, I know that I do not know, or at best I know very little. Regardless of what others say, I make no claim to superhuman wisdom.

This reputation may have begun when my impetuous friend Chaerphon went to the Oracle of Delphi. He asked, is anyone wiser than Socrates? And the priestess answered that no one is wiser. The reputation which then followed me around has caused me to reflect, perhaps I could find a wiser man and so disprove the oracle.

Upon interviewing a politician, I discovered that he knows nothing and thinks that he knows, whereas I neither know nor think that I know. This examination earned his hatred. Goaded by the word of God, I tested other politicians and incurred more enmity. I found that men in high repute are foolish while some inferior men are wiser.

My search then led to poets. They write by some kind of genius or inspiration, but they barely understand their own work, let alone attain wisdom beyond their work. Next came the artisans, whose great skill exceeds my own, yet I found that artisans are also prone to overestimate their wisdom for matters beyond their expertise.

This investigation into the wisdom of men has become the occupation of my advanced age. In my devotion to the will of God, I do not step forward publicly to advise on matters of the state. Rather I go about as a private individual, urging others to strive for virtue.

Some young men of the richer classes have followed me around and subsequently tried on their own to imitate me. If my method were applied for amusement, it could cause embarrassment. But the people should be angry with themselves, not with me.

I categorically reject the accusation of deceit and anarchy. Instead of saying I am a villain, let them name the evil that I teach. I am not an evil-doer, nor do I preach revolution. It is the prosecution who does wrong by accusing me without a proper investigation.

Examines the prosecutor

Although the prosecution has called no witnesses and supplies no testimony to the baseless accusations made against me, the court permits me to question the prosecutor about the indictment. Let us start with the charge of corrupting the youth.

Meletus, if there is a corrupter of youth, then there must be an improver of youth. Who is their improver? Meletus, who is the improver of youth? Will you not answer? Have you not investigated the matter that you represent?

Do you say the Laws improve the youth? That may be so, but I am asking WHO wrote the Laws? WHO knows the Laws? WHO instructs and improves the youth? The Judges? All of them? The Senators and members of the citizen assembly? They all improve the youth?

And I alone am their so-called corrupter? Then happy indeed is the condition of our youth for having only one corrupter, while the rest of the world improves them.

Meletus, you have shown that you never gave thought to the young or their benefit. So you have formulated your indictment carelessly at the very start.

Another question. Is it better to live among good citizens than bad ones? After all, good citizens do good to each other. Is there anybody who would prefer to be injured by his neighbors? Nobody likes to be injured, right?

Then why do you claim that I purposely poison the minds of young? Surely by the age of seventy, I should have been harmed by a person that I deliberately hurt. Can you produce such a person? Yet you say that I have harmed the young on purpose.

As you know, there is no punishment for a wrong done unintentionally. Therefore you claim falsely that I have acted maliciously. What you should have done as a good neighbor, is to pull me aside privately, and admonish me about the error of my ways. But instead of instructing me in person, you have indicted me publicly in a court of punishment.

Now I move on to the claim that I teach the young to disregard the gods of the state and substitute my own divinities. So Meletus, do you say that I acknowledge some gods or that I believe in none at all?

None? So you really mean that I am a complete atheist? That I pervert the deity of the sun and the moon?

Let me ask you, can there be horsemanship without horses, or flute playing without flutes? Then how can you claim in your indictment that I substitute new divinities at the same time that you call me an atheist? Your indictment is some kind of riddle because you have nothing real to charge me with.

A more elaborate defence is unnecessary. I am simply being destroyed by envy and malicious talk. This is unfairness is nothing new. Others have died before me and more will die later for the same reason.

Defends his character

A good man considers right and wrong ahead of the risk of life or death. In the hour of danger the heroes of Troy chose the honorable path of fighting to death rather than living in disgrace. I similarly held my post and faced death like a man when I served under military generals at Potidea, Amphipolis, and Delium.

Now serving at the order of God to fill the philosopher's mission, I do not fear death. Any wisdom I have is that I do not claim to know. But this much I do know, that disobedience to the order of God, or of a better man, is evil. I will not avoid the opportunity for good over the certainty of evil.

Nor will I cease this mission in exchange for my release. While I love and honor the City of Athens, nothing can supercede the higher order of God to practice and teach philosophy. No greater good comes to the State than my service to the God.

I meet with anyone, young or old, citizen or alien, urging you to care more about improving your soul than about your person or properties. Why lay up money, honor, and reputation at the expense of wisdom, truth, and improvement of the soul? Money and every good of man come from virtue, not the other way around.

THIS is my teaching, regardless of what Antyus says, and I will continue it, even upon penalty of death.

Public life and private life

Men of Athens, putting me to death will injure yourselves more than me. I am like a horsefly sent by God arouse, persuade, and reproach the State. At the neglect of my own concerns I have come to you individually, like a father or older brother, exhorting you to regard virtue.

My conscience prevents me from coming forward to advise the State publicly. Ever since childhood, a voice has come to me, telling me not to take an action. This oracle does not give me orders, it only stops me. This inner voice has stood in the way of being a politician, or I would have perished long ago.

No one survives long by leading a public life and fighting for righteousness in the State. Consider my deeds as Senator, representing the tribe of Antiochis during the time of democracy. When the generals at the battle of Arginusae were to be indicted as a group for leaving behind the bodies of the slain, I alone opposed this illegal action. I endured threats of impeachment and arrest before you eventually agreed.

When the Thirty oligarchs were in power, I received orders along with four others to fetch Leon the Salaminian for execution. The others obeyed the command, but I went home, quietly avoiding participation in their criminal oppression. This action might have cost my life, had not the Thirty fallen from power shortly afterward.

Do think I could have survived all these years in public life if I always tried to do right and put justice first? In any case, I have acted consistently in public and private life.

Socrates' followers

Regarding the people erroneously called my disciples, I have no regular disciples. Anyone young or old, rich or poor, is welcome to hear me conduct my mission, and to ask, answer, and listen at no cost. I speak the same way privately or publicly - a disgruntled person who dislikes the outcome of my examination may spread rumors, but the rumors would be untrue.

Perhaps people enjoy my cross-examination of pretenders to wisdom. However, I do not conduct this activity for amusement, but rather out of duty to God. Oracles, visions, and signs of divine power impose this mission upon me.

Regarding this so-called bad advice to the youth of Athens, where are your witnesses? If I had hurt them during the years, why have they not come forward to complain of their injury? Why have their fathers, brothers, relatives, and kinsmen not come forward to explain the evil they have suffered?

Now is their time, and I will make way to hear them. On the other hand, there are plenty of witnesses in this court who will testify for me. They include Crito, Critobolus his son, Lysanias father of Aeschines, and Antiphon father of Espignes. Brothers of several who have

associated with me include Nicostratus brother of Theotodus, Paralus brother of Theages, Adeimantus brother of Plato, and Aentodorus brother of Appolodorus.

I could mention a great many others. These citizens are ready to witness on behalf of the so-called corrupter. Why indeed do the youth and their elders support me with their testimony? They know I speak the truth and Meletus lies.

I will not call my sons, two young and another almost full-grown, as witnesses. Nor will I throw myself at the mercy of the court, make a tearful spectacle of myself, or discredit the State in any of these ways. It would be impious of me to act that way, especially as I am being tried for impiety.

Let the court render judgment, not as a gift or matter of emotion, but according to the laws. I believe there are gods in a higher sense than my accusers believe.

Socrates' penalty phase comments

With the help of Anytus and Lycon, Meletus has barely gotten the votes for conviction. Otherwise he would have incurred a fine.

So Meletus proposes death as the penalty, and I propose that I get my due. What should a man receive who has never been idle, yet never attained wealth, family, military, oratory, judgeship, or status?

Perhaps I was too honest to go the route of personal attainments. Instead I went where I could do the most good, privately, to every one of you. I sought to persuade every man among you to look within, to seek virtue and wisdom ahead of private interests, and look first to the State before acting on interests of the State.

As your benefactor I should be rewarded by the means to continue instructing you. Perhaps you should award me a title in the Prytaneum and a stipend, similar to prize that horsemen and charioteers receive at Olympia. They who give you the appearance of happiness don't need the help, and I give you the reality. An award is the just return.

Imprisonment, exile, or a fine do not comport with my actions. I have not wronged anyone deliberately and I have not committed a crime.

Why should I live in prison, as a slave to the magistrates, for doing no wrong? Why should I agree to hold my tongue and accept exile, when to do so would mean disobeying a divine command? If the punishment is to be a fine, then let it be according to my means, which is a minae, or let it be thirty minae in case that amount suffices.

Again I say, the greatest good of man is to daily converse about virtue, and an unexamined life is not worth living.

Socrates' death penalty comments

The City of Athens gains a bad reputation for killing a wise man instead of letting nature run its course. Already advanced in years, I am not far from death.

To those who have convicted me, there is nothing more I could say to gain an acquittal. Any deficiency leading to my conviction was not of words. Perhaps you expected me to weep, wail, and lament, but course would be unworthy of me. I would rather die speaking in my manner than live by speaking in your manner.

Friends, the real difficulty is not avoiding death, but to avoid unrighteousness which runs faster than death. I am old, so even the slow runner overtakes me. My accusers are keen and quick, yet unrighteousness has overtaken them.

As I go to my death, you go to your condemnation to suffer the penalty of villainy and wrong. A much heavier punishment awaits you. The many accusers that I have held back are younger and faster. They will be more severe and you will face greater censure. There is no escape. You should have known that improving yourselves, not crushing others is the easier and better way.

My friends who voted for acquittal, I call you my judges. Let me tell you about a wonderful circumstance. The oracle has permitted these things to occur. In leaving my house and in speaking today, I suffered no opposition in my conscience. What has happened is good.

Death will hold one of two outcomes. If death is a state of no consciousness, it will be an undisturbed sleep, and eternity will be only a single night. But, if death be a journey to another place, then I look forward to my reward, to meet other sons of God who were righteous in their own lives. Who would not like to converse with immortals like Orpheus, Musaeus, Hesiod, Homer, the leader of the Trojan expedition, Odysseus, Sisyphus, or nameless others?

Be of good cheer and know this truth - that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. I see clearly that to die and be released was better for me. I am not angry with my accusers and condemners, who mistakenly think they harm me.

As my sons grow up, urge them to care about virtue. If they care more about riches, or pretend to be something they are not, please trouble them as I have troubled you. If you do this, I and my sons will receive justice at your hands.