

# Class Three - Apology (up to 28b)

Philosophical Perspectives - Ryan Simonelli

October 04, 2022

## 1 The Context

- **The Apology:**
  - One of Plato's earliest writings, thought to be written shortly after the actual trial.
  - Recounts the trial and conviction of Socrates.
  - Plato's account of the trial of Socrates is not the only one. Xenophon also has an account, also called "Apology"
    - \* Quite a bit of difference between the two accounts:
      - In Xenophon's version, Socrates is not really trying to defend himself—Socrates is happy to be put to death for crimes rather than die of old age.
      - In Plato's version (though Socrates does not resist his death, once that verdict has been declared), he does really try to defend himself.
- **The Historical Context and Setting:**
  - Taking place in 399 BC.
  - In ancient Athens, you didn't actually need to be the victim of a crime yourself in order to take someone to court—any citizen can take someone to court, and that is what Meletus (who Socrates says he's never met) is doing.
  - The defending is permitted to make two speeches:
    - \* One defending oneself against the charges.
    - \* If convicted, one proposing a counter-penalty.
  - The jury was around 500 people.
  - Meletus officially the accuser with others—Anytus and Lycon, who Socrates mentions—as supporters.

## 2 Socrates's Characterization of the Charges (18b-19d)

- **Sophistry:** Socrates says that he's been characterized as someone "who makes the worse argument the stronger," (18b).
  - A sophist is someone who uses rhetorical tricks for personal ends, to get people to believe what they want, rather than for discovering what's really true.
- **Not Believing in the Gods:** Being "a student of all things in the sky and below the earth," is meant to be a charge, as many "believe that those who study these things do not even believe in the gods," (18c).
- **Being (immodestly) wise:** Though one might not normally think it a bad thing, Socrates is concerned to repudiate the charge that he is wise. It becomes clear that he specifically wants to repudiate the charge of being *immodestly* wise—having a kind of *higher wisdom*, over and above mere "human wisdom," (20d).
- **Aristophanes's *Clouds* as a Contributing Factor:**

- Socrates mentions a “writer of comedies” as one of the people who he knows thinks of them in way described by the prosecution (18d). As he says later, he’s referring to Aristophanes (19c), and, particularly, the portrayal of Socrates in the play *Clouds*.
- In *Clouds*, Aristophanes portrays Socrates as clearly guilty of these charges.
  - \* **Immodest Wisdom:** Socrates is first depicted as comically concerned with things in the sky, swinging, suspended high up above the stage, saying “I’d never be able to investigate all higher matters correctly without elevating my intellect and thought and mixing my delicate mind with the kindred air,” (230).
  - \* **Sophistry:**

STREPSIADES: I need you to teach me the things I’ve come to learn.  
 SOKRATES: And what would that be?  
 STREPSIADES: I want to learn to *argue*. I’ve so many debts, and creditors wild with rage.
  - \* **Not Believing in the Gods:**

STREPSIADES: And whatever the fee you charge, I swear by the gods that I’ll pay it in full!  
 SOKRATES: The gods! Which ones will you swear by? We *have* no gods in the currency of our speech.

### 3 Against the Charge of Sophistry and that he Teaches a “High Wisdom” (19e-24b)

- **Doesn’t have a School, Doesn’t Charge:** Socrates first insists that, unlike other traveling teachers of rhetoric, he does not actively teach people nor charge a fee (19d-20c). Those who follow him around do so “of their own free will,” (23c).
- **Socrates’s “Human Wisdom”:** Socrates admits that he does possess a kind of wisdom, but a peculiar kind of “human wisdom,” (20d).
  - **A Claim from the Oracle:** Socrates reports that, upon being asked if any man was wiser than him, the oracle at Delphi replied “that no one was wiser,” (21a).
  - **A Puzzle:** “Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very conscious that I am not wise at all; what does he mean by saying that I am the wisest?” (21b).
  - **Socrates’s Ironic Solution:** “I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I no; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.”
  - **Interpreting the God’s Claim:** “He is using my name as an example, as if he said: ‘This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless.’”
  - **A Divine Mission:** Socrates takes himself to be doing “service to the god” by showing people that they are not wise. And, as he reports, people are not very happy about it.
- **The Basic Point of Defense:** I simply bring out that various people—poets, craftsman, politicians, etc.—don’t know as much as they say they know. That bothers them and causes them to slander me with these charges.
- **Discussion Questions:**
  - How does Socrates’s choice of language in the trial—his use of “the same kind of language as I am accustomed to use in the marketplace”—bear on his attempt to repudiate these charges of sophistry and higher wisdom? Do we think the “wise men” he contrasts himself to would use the same kind of language?
  - Is this Socratic idea of a sort of wisdom consisting in an understanding of one’s lack of wisdom identifiable in other philosophers or thinkers?
    - \* **Lao Tzu:** “To know that you do not know is highest. To not know but think you know is flawed,” (*Tao Te Ching*, verse 71).

## 4 Against the Charge of Corrupting the Youth (24c-26a)

- **The Analogy with Animals Argument (24d-25c):** A relatively weak argument, meant to cast some doubt on Meletus's knowledge of the subject of the youth and its potential corruption:

- According to Meletus, most everyone improves the youth and only a few (Socrates and a few others) corrupt them.
- For animals such as horses, the majority of people (those who use horses) corrupt them, whereas only a few (the horse breeders) improve them.
- It would be a surprisingly "happy state of affairs," but a rather implausible one, if it worked the opposite way with humans.
- So Meletus's stance is rather implausible.

**Question:** Is this argument, where Socrates is clearly implying that it's likely that the majority of people in the court corrupt the youth, rather than benefit them, going to be effective in court?

- **The "Why Would I?" Argument (25c-26b):** An attempt at a more conclusive argument:
  - According to Meletus, Socrates is knowingly corrupting the youth—making them wicked.
  - The youth in question are Socrates's associates—the people closest to him
  - But wicked people harm those who are closest to them.
  - Clearly, no one would rather be harmed than benefited by their associates.
  - So, if Socrates were knowingly corrupting the youth, he'd be knowingly making it more likely that he'd be harmed by his associates.
  - Since no one would knowingly make himself be harmed by their associates, Socrates can't be knowingly corrupting the youth.

**Question:** Does this sort of argument, premised on the defendant's rationality, stand up in court? Is it not open for the prosecutor to simply respond by saying that the defendant is irrational? After all, if everyone was rational all the time, wouldn't no wrong would be done at all?

## 5 Against the Charge of Not Believing in the Gods of the City (26b-28a)

- **Clarifying the Accusation:** Meletus specifically accuses Socrates of being an atheist.
  - Meletus characterizes Socrates as having the views of Anaxagoras, a notable Presocratic philosopher, and Socrates corrects him.
- **The Argument:**
  - Believing in X-activities requires belief in Xs.
    - \* Belief in human activities requires belief humans.
    - \* Belief in flute-playing activities requires belief in flute players.
  - According to accusation, Socrates "believes in spiritual things and teaches about them," (27c).
  - Spirits are either gods or children of gods (27d).
  - Either way, it follows that Socrates believes in gods.

## 6 Further Questions

- At various points, Socrates makes claims and arguments that seem like they're likely to anger the jurors. These people are the very sorts of people he's claiming lack wisdom they take themselves to have, and who. Once again, what's Socrates's point?

- We've considered Socrates's main defense against the charges. As we know, he ends up getting convicted and put to death. What does this say about justice in Athenian democracy? (Note: our answer to this question will be important to keep in mind when we consider what Socrates ends up saying in the *Crito*).