

Lecture: Plato's Apology

The Apology as written by Plato, Socrates' student and friend, and is likely an accurate account of what Socrates said during his trial. Socrates was on trial for being irreligious. The fact that he was on trial for that was strange, because Athens was a very open society and tolerated free speech.

Socrates was a fixture of Athenian life. He held discussions on philosophy in the agora, or marketplace, and became well known throughout the city. He had been doing this for a long time, and it is quite unlikely that this was the real reason for his conviction.

Charges against Socrates:

1. He doesn't believe in the gods of the city.
2. He corrupts young people.

Socrates says that these charges are just a cover for their real problem with him: their belief that he is a sophist.

Sophists were naturalist philosophers who investigated the natural world (in a kind of early science) and taught rhetoric, or public speaking.

Sophists were thought to be atheists, because they explained natural phenomena without using the gods as an explanation. In effect, Socrates was charged with being an atheist.

What is wrong with being an atheist?

- Persuading people that there is no god is dangerous because gods are traditionally thought to be the guarantors of morality. They decide what is right or wrong and punish people for doing bad things. If you remove the gods, you are removing the basis of morality. Denying gods is the same as denying that moral standards really exist.

Socrates was not actually an atheist, though he was also not a traditional believer. So why was he brought to trial?

Socrates' prosecutors were radical democrats. Two years prior the trial, the democratic government in Athens had been overthrown by oligarchs. The oligarchs were eventually driven out of office. The democrats then started prosecuting people who had supported the oligarchs, including some of Socrates' students. Socrates' association with these people was likely one of the reasons that he was brought to trial. Questions remain; Was Socrates a democrat? Or were his real sympathies with the oligarchs?

The Apology can be divided into three distinct parts:

- I. "I know nothing" – Socrates' famous claim to ignorance and intellectual humility.

2. Religious view – Socrates makes claims about God and what matters in life. He says that goodness is all that matters, and that god looks after good people. He values spiritual over material goods.
3. Socrates on death – Death is not frightening. Socrates uses skepticism to arrive at this: we don't know that death is bad, so we shouldn't be afraid.

1. *Skepticism*: Socrates tells how his friend Chaerephon asked the oracle at Delphi if there was anyone smarter than Socrates; the oracle said that there wasn't. Socrates didn't believe this, because he thought that he really didn't know anything. He set out to disprove the oracle by finding someone smarter than him. By asking questions, Socrates learned that all the people who had reputations for being smart actually weren't. These people thought that they were wise, but Socrates realized that he was smarter because he at least knew and admitted that he knew less than others.

What didn't the political leader Socrates interviewed know? What do we think political leaders know that makes them great leaders? Ethics. The best leaders have a good grasp of ethical knowledge. Socrates questioned the most respected ethical leader in Athens – Pericles – and found that his ideas didn't make sense. Socrates found that he was smarter than Pericles when it came to ethics.

Socrates kept on questioning people, annoying them because he showed them that they didn't know as much as they thought they did. He also finds that elites had the worst ideas about ethics, while normal people had the best. This is a thoroughly democratic position, because if all people are equally ethically competent, then that is a good reason for thinking that they should have an equal share in running the government.

The kind of skepticism that Socrates exhibits is a key feature of rationalism. He requires reasons for opinions, and not mere appeals to authority.

2. *Socrates the spiritualist*: Socrates has a dual role in the history of Western thought. He inspired the skeptical, rational, scientific, and humanist tradition, which often denies or minimizes the existence of god. He also inspired the Platonic, Stoic, and Christian view that there is one god who created the universe and cares about right and wrong (ethical monotheism). Both views can be found in the *Apology*.

Socrates sees life as a moral test. You exist because god wants to know if you will be good. Material things and worldly honors are just distractions.

When Achilles says he'll die to avenge his friend, can we say that he values his own life? Socrates says that he doesn't value his own life, doesn't care if he lives or dies. But if it doesn't matter if one lives or dies, why is it a big deal and meaningful if he sacrifices his life? In order for a sacrifice to be meaningful, the thing that is sacrificed, in this case life, ought

to be worth a lot. But Socrates says that life isn't worth a lot. If that's true, he's not making a very big sacrifice.

3. *On death*: Socrates doesn't fear death because we don't know anything about it. In order to fear it, don't we have to know it's scary or bad? But we don't know anything about death, so we don't know it's bad. Thus we shouldn't worry about it.

Socrates also says that death is one of two things: (1) nothingness or (2) an afterlife. If (1) is true, then we have nothing to worry about because there won't be any pain, and we won't be around to suffer. It will just be like a great night's sleep that we don't remember. If it's (2), then we still have nothing to worry about, because we'll be in the afterlife, which could end up being a good time.

Socrates on ethics

Why didn't Socrates give up philosophy in order to stay alive? Because he cares more about being a good person, cares more for his soul, than he does about being alive or having money, status, or power, or our bodies.

Why does Socrates think there is a conflict between doing the right thing and pursuing worldly pleasure or gain? Probably because power, money, and status often require moral transgressions in order to be maintained. But perhaps the division between worldly and spiritual things is not so clear. If material things have no value, why is it wrong to steal? If life has no value, why is it wrong to kill people? We actually do think that these physical things – money, life, etc – actually do have real value.