Apology

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PLATO

Plato's father Ariston descended from Codrus, the last King of Athens, and his mother Perictione had ties to Solon, one of the creators of the Athenian Constitution. Plato planned a political career until 404 BC, when Athens shifted to an Oligarchy controlled by wealthy men. After democracy was restored in 403 BC, Plato again considered politics until Socrates, Plato's mentor, was accused of impiety and corruption and subsequently put to death in 399 BC. Responding to this gross display of injustice, Plato abandoned politics for philosophy. He ultimately produced a volume of work that has heavily influenced western thought and provided the world with a record not only of his own philosophical thoughts, but also historical documentation of Socrates's influential years in Athens. Concerned with justice, beauty, and equality, he influenced many important thinkers by founding the Academy, a philosophy school where Aristotle was a student for twenty years before establishing his own institution when Plato died in 348 or 347 BC.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After Sparta defeated Athens in the Peloponnesian War in 404 BC, Spartans overtook the city and installed an oppressive oligarchy made up of thirty men. This group became known as "the Thirty" or "the Thirty Tyrants," quickly gaining notoriety for their violent ways, as they killed 1,500 Athenians during their short nine-month rule. In his *apologia*, Socrates references the Thirty, explaining that they "summoned" him and four other Athenians and ordered them to capture a well-known Athenian general and bring him to "the Hall" to be executed. Because his "whole concern is not to do anything unjust or impious," though, Socrates refused to capture the general, instead going home while the other four Athenians carried out the task. "I might have been put to death for this, had not the government fallen shortly afterwards," Socrates says, referencing the fact that the Thirty Tyrants were overthrown within the year by Athenian rebels who restored the city's democratic system. Socrates uses this as an example of his unwillingness to undermine his values.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Early in his *apologia* (or defense), Socrates mentions a play called *The Clouds* by Aristophanes. Produced in 423 BC, this was a satirical play that parodied Sophists and intellectuals in Athens, specifically singling out Socrates as a greedy and fraudulent teacher who manipulated rich people. Socrates references the play in his defense to illustrate that the jury might be biased against him, since he upholds that Aristophanes' representation of him is entirely inaccurate. After all, he says, he does not accept money from people in exchange for knowledge, and—in any case—doesn't even think he knows enough to be a teacher in the first place. On another note, it's worth considering Plato's other dialogues that concern Socrates, namely *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, *Meno*, and *Phaedo*, all of which showcase Socrates's practice of dialectical questioning—the very practice that leads to his trial in *Apology*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Apology
- **Where Written:** Ancient Greece
- **When Published:** Sometime in the decade proceeding Socrates's trial in 399 BC.
- **Literary Period:** Ancient Greek Philosophy
- **Genre:** Philosophy, Philosophical Dialogue, Fiction
- **Setting:** Athens, Greece in 399 BC
- **Climax:** Having made his defense, Socrates is sentenced to death.
- **Antagonist:** Meletus
- **Point of View:** Although Socrates speaks in the first-person for the vast majority of *Apology*, the document is technically presented as a dialogic transcript.

EXTRA CREDIT

Socrates & Democracy. Experts debate whether or not Socrates believed in democracy, since he disparages the system in Plato's *The Republic* but apparently respects it in *Apology*. Citing the fact that Plato—who was himself deeply critical of democracy—wrote *The Republic* long after Socrates died, many uphold that the text is not an accurate reflection of the man's political beliefs, ultimately suggesting that Socrates' attitude toward democracy in *Apology* is probably the more authentic portrayal of his views.

Influence on Christianity. In addition to Aristotle, Plato taught people like Plotinus and Proclus, Neoplatonists who developed his ideas and eventually laid the groundwork for early Christian thinkers like Saint Augustine.

PLOT SUMMARY

Plato's *Apology*—a transliteration of the Ancient Greek word *apologia*, meaning "defense"—is supposedly a historical record

of the speech Socrates gave to the Athenian jury after being accused of "corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes." Socrates begins his *apologia* by commenting on how his accusers have spoken about him. "I do not know, men of Athens, how my accusers affected you; as for me, I was almost carried away in spite of myself, so persuasively did they speak," he begins. However, he notes, these accusers—who include Meletus and Anytus—have not spoken the truth. Indeed, Socrates insists that although his detractors have warned the jury about his cunning rhetorical trickery, he is not an accomplished orator. In fact, he asks the jury to excuse his manner of speaking, since he is seventy years old and has never appeared in court. As such, he says, he has decided to speak as he normally does, using simple, straightforward language.

Socrates says many people have spoken ill of him over the years, and so he decides to address their accusations first. He fears this slander more than he fears what Meletus and Anytus have said about him, since his unknown accusers have been working for a long time to "persuade" the people of Athens to distrust him. "They spoke to you at an age when you would most readily believe them, some of you being children and adolescents, and they won their case by default, as there was no defense," Socrates says. Nevertheless, he says he will defend himself against these slanderous remarks, beginning by refuting the idea that he has "busie[d] himself studying things in the sky and below the earth" and spreading these problematic ideas throughout Athens.

To this end, he makes it clear that he is not a Sophist (intellectuals in ancient Greece who taught philosophy to the sons of rich men in exchange for large amounts of money). Unlike the Sophists, Socrates has never accepted money for his teachings, for he believes he doesn't possess the "knowledge" necessary to do such a thing. To that end, he upholds that he merely has "human wisdom." He then says that his friend, Chaerephon, traveled to Delphi and asked the oracle if there is anyone wiser than Socrates, and the oracle told him there isn't. When Socrates himself heard this, he explains, he was deeply confused, since he understands that he is not truly wise.

Wanting to test the Delphic oracle's assertion, Socrates visited a man he considered wiser than himself. After speaking to him, though, he realized the man was not as knowledgeable as he believed. "I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not," Socrates says, explaining that he then decided to help this man understand his own ignorance. Unsurprisingly, this upset the man, as well as a handful of bystanders who were listening to the conversation. As Socrates walked away, he thought to himself, "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 know; 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."

Still addressing the jury, Socrates tells his listeners that he decided to visit other supposedly wise men, hoping to find someone truly knowledgeable. Going to the city's most well-respected poets, though, Socrates was disappointed to discover that they, too, were not truly wise, though they thought highly of themselves and believed wholeheartedly in their own intelligence. At this point, Socrates visited the city's craftsmen. "They knew things I did not know," he says, "and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, men of Athens, the good craftsmen seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets: each of them, because of his success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had, so that I asked myself, on behalf of the oracle, whether I should prefer to be as I am, with neither their wisdom nor their ignorance, or to have both. The answer I gave myself and the oracle was that it was to my advantage to be as I am."

Since then, Socrates says, he has been working to spread the Delphic oracle's message that human wisdom is "worthless." To do this, he has continued to travel throughout Athens and unveil the ignorance of men who are supposedly wise. In doing so, though, he has gained an unfavorable reputation, one that frames him as impious and philosophically contrarian, though he's only working in service of the Delphic oracle (and, thus, the god Apollo). This, he upholds, is why he has been accused of "corrupting the young."

Having addressed these accusations made by unnamed detractors, Socrates turns his attention to the claims made by Meletus and Anytus—namely, that he is "guilty of corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things." Speaking directly to Meletus, he begins to question the man about the specifics of these accusations, asking if he can name anyone in particular who "improve[s]" the youth of Athens. In response, Meletus says that everyone—the jury, the assembly, etc.—improves the youth; everyone, that is, except Socrates. As such, he states that Socrates "alone corrupt[s] them." To this Socrates says, "Tell me: does this also apply to horses, do you think? Or is quite the contrary true, one individual is able to improve them, or very few, namely, the horse breeders, whereas the majority, if they have horses and use them, corrupt them? Is that not the case, Meletus, both with horses and all other animals?" Going on, he says that if he himself "make[s] one of [his] associates wicked," he himself "run[s] the risk of being harmed by him." As such, he posits that if he *does* "corrupt the young," he must do so unwillingly. And if *this* is the case, then it follows that Meletus should not be punishing him but rather teaching him to improve.

Focusing now on Meletus's claim that he does not believe in gods, Socrates again questions him about the nature of his accusations. Although Meletus says Socrates doesn't believe in

gods at all, he concedes that he thinks Socrates believes in and teaches "spiritual things." This, Socrates points out, is a contradiction, since Meletus eventually admits that spirits are "either gods or the children of gods." As such, if Socrates believes in "spiritual things," then he must also believe in gods. In this way, Socrates shows the jury that Meletus is accusing him of not believing in gods while simultaneously asserting that he *does* believe in gods. Having unearthed these inconsistencies, Socrates suggests that his accusers don't actually care about corruption and piety. Rather, they simply want to slander him.

Next, Socrates considers the fact that he might be sentenced to death. This, he asserts, doesn't bother him, since he doesn't know what death is like. Assuming death is a bad thing would be a presumption of wisdom, he says. "To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know," he upholds. As a result, he'd rather maintain his values and face the possibility of death. If the jury acquits him, he says, he will continue to behave as he always has, even if they ask him to refrain from speaking about wisdom and belief. "I think there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to god," he says, adding that he's delivering this defense not for his own sake, but for the jury members themselves—since he knows that if they execute him, they'll be acting immorally.

Before finishing his initial defense, Socrates informs the jury that he will not beg for innocence, nor will he call upon witnesses to testify on his behalf. This, he explains, is because he respects the judicial system too much to demean it with such hysterics.

The jury convenes and concludes that Socrates is guilty, and Meletus "asks for the penalty of death." At this point, Socrates is allowed to address the jury to advocate for whatever punishment he thinks he deserves. However, he remains unfazed by the guilty verdict, pointing out that it was a very narrow vote. He then says that, since he has done nothing but help his fellow Athenians by acting on behalf of the Delphic oracle, he believes he should be rewarded. At the same time, though, he knows the jury will disagree with this, so he suggests that he should have to pay a fine, since money means nothing to him anyway. However, he has dedicated his life to spreading knowledge free of charge, meaning that he lives in poverty. As such, he says that his friends, Crito, Critobulus, and Apollodorus, have agreed to pay a fine of thirty minas on his behalf.

After another vote, the jury sentences Socrates to death. Socrates says they will soon regret their decision, since people who want to "denigrate" Athens will surely condemn the city for killing a wise man. However, he says he has no qualms about how he has defended himself, asserting that he was convicted because he refused to tell the jury what they wanted to hear or to debase himself through "lamentations and tears."

Emphasizing the fact that he has only tried to help his fellow Athenians remain moral, he asks his listeners to make sure they hold his sons accountable if they ever become greedy or foolish. "Reproach them as I reproach you," he says. "If you do this, I shall have been justly treated by you, and my sons also."

Having said all this, Socrates acknowledges that the hour of his death has come. "I go to die, you go to live," he says. "Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Socrates – A philosopher living in Athens, Greece in the fourth century BC and the primary speaker in *Apology*. A clever thinker and shrewd conversationalist, Socrates is known for encouraging people to carefully scrutinize their beliefs. By asking a series of simple questions, he often tricks his interlocutors into unwittingly contradicting themselves, thereby revealing the flaws in their thinking. Unsurprisingly, this practice has gained him a number of enemies, which is why he is on trial in *Apology*. Defending himself against accusations of impiety and corruption made by Meletus, Anytus, Lycon, and a number of unidentified Athenians, Socrates delivers his *apologia*—or defense—by examining the contradictions that exist in his detractors' logic. He upholds that the Delphic oracle has stated that no one is wiser than he is, explaining that this is simply because he understands—unlike the city's other wise men—that he only has "human wisdom," which is "worthless." Because of this, he has tried to convince his fellow Athenians to embrace their own ignorance rather than pretending to understand things they don't actually grasp. As a result, he has been brought to court, where he refuses to placate his accusers. Indeed, Socrates is a man with a strong sense of moral integrity, meaning that he's unwilling to tell the jurors what they need to hear in order to find him innocent. Rather, he simply explains why his detractors have slandered him, insisting that the only reason he is defending himself is because he wants to help the jurors avoid wading into immorality by executing him. However, the jury ends up sentencing him to death, and though he disagrees with the verdict, he admits that he isn't afraid of death, since it is an unknown. As such, he accepts his fate, merely warning the jurors that they're acting against the gods by executing him.

Meletus – Socrates's most outspoken accuser. There is very little historical record concerning Meletus, other than what Socrates himself says in Plato's writings. Given that Socrates says Meletus is "vexed" at him "on behalf of the poets," it is reasonable to assume that he is a poet, though it's worth noting that—despite what this profession might imply about his linguistic or intellectual abilities—Socrates easily uncovers his ineloquent command of language and reason. Although there is

no document of the actual speech, Meletus delivers remarks in court outlining Socrates's supposed offenses—remarks to which Socrates responds during his *apologia*. Accusing him of impiety and corruption of the youth, Meletus acts as the spokesperson for Anytus, Lycon, and a number of unnamed Athenians who dislike Socrates. In the end, it is Meletus who urges the jury to give Socrates the death sentence.

Anytus – One of Socrates's accusers, along with Meletus and Lycon. Socrates says that Anytus is "vexed" with him "on behalf of the craftsmen and the politicians." According to the historical record, Anytus was an Athenian politician who fought as a general in the Peloponnesian War, though neither of these details surface in Plato's *Apology*. At one point during his *apologia*, Socrates references a remark Anytus apparently made earlier in the trial—namely, that the jury has no choice but to execute Socrates, now that he has been brought to court. "For if I should be acquitted," Socrates says, outlining Anytus' opinion, "your sons would practice the teachings of Socrates and all be thoroughly corrupted."

The Delphic Oracle – A priestess known as the "Pythian," whom the god Apollo uses to communicate directly to humans at a shrine in Delphi (an area the Greeks believed to be the center of the world). During his *apologia*, Socrates explains that his friend, Chaerephon, traveled to Delphi and asked the Pythian if anyone is wiser than Socrates. In response, the Delphic oracle informed him that there is, in fact, no one wiser than Socrates, a message Chaerephon then relayed to Socrates himself. Upon hearing this, Socrates was quite confused, since he knows he isn't wise. As such, he decided to test the Pythian's claim by going around and speaking to the wisest Athenians he knows. Before long, he discovered that these men are not wise, but only *think* they are. In this way, he explains to the jury, he is wiser than these people, since he does not "think he knows something when he does not." After coming upon this realization, Socrates tells the jury, he set out to encourage his fellow Athenians to recognize their own ignorance, believing that he was "assisting" Apollo by spreading this important idea. However, people like Meletus and Anytus took issue with this message, which is why they called Socrates to court.

Crito – One of Socrates's friends and "demesmen" (or member of the same township), and the father of Critobulus. During his *apologia*, Socrates refutes the claim that he has corrupted the Athenian youth. In doing so, he suggests that Crito—who knows him well and is present at the trial—would surely stand up and speak honestly if he believed that Socrates had harmed his son. After the jury finds Socrates guilty, he has an opportunity to ask for a specific punishment. Since he has no money, he says that Crito, Critobulus, Apollodorus, and Plato—all good friends of his—have offered to lend him money so that he can set the penalty at a fine of "thirty minas."

Plato – A philosopher, and one of Socrates's disciples. It is because of Plato that Socrates's *apologia* has survived at all, since he is the one who wrote it out and preserved it. One of history's most important writers, Plato is mentioned twice in Socrates' defense—once when Socrates lists the men who would gladly testify on his behalf, and once when he explains that Plato—along with Crito, Critobulus, and Apollodorus—has offered to lend him money so he can pay a fine of "thirty minas" as a penalty.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lycon – One of Socrates's accusers, along with Meletus and Anytus. Socrates says that Lycon is "vexed" with him "on behalf of the orators." Other than this statement, Socrates does not mention Lycon again during his *apologia*.

Chaerephon – One of Socrates's friends "from youth." Socrates explains in his *apologia* that Chaerephon is an "impulsive" man who visited the oracle at Delphi and asked if there is anyone wiser than Socrates. When the Pythian responded by telling him there isn't, he then relayed this information to Socrates himself.

Critobulus – Crito's son, and one of the Athenians—along with Apollodorus, Plato, and many others—who believe in Socrates's innocence. When Socrates is found guilty, Critobulus offers to lend him money so that he can set the penalty at "thirty minas."

Apollodorus – One of Socrates's friends and "demesmen" (or member of the same township). Like Crito, Critobulus, and Plato, Apollodorus offers to lend Socrates money so that he can pay a fine of "thirty minas" as a penalty.

Aristophanes – A playwright in Ancient Greece who wrote *The Clouds*, a play that includes a caricature of Socrates as a dishonest teacher. During his *apologia*, Socrates uses *The Clouds* to illustrate the fact that his fellow Athenians have been unfairly predisposed to distrust him.

Leon from Salamis – An Athenian general during the Peloponnesian War.

THEMES

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WISDOM, PIETY, AND BELIEF

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates upholds that true wisdom involves acknowledging one's own ignorance. Although his detractors have brought him to court because they believe he's using his aptitude for critical inquiry to destabilize the city's conventional structures of belief, he argues that "the god at Delphi" has shown him that

"human wisdom is worthless," a message he is now trying to spread throughout the community. Unfortunately, though, when Socrates tries to impress this upon his fellow Athenians, they think he's advocating for a completely different set of beliefs. In reality, he's trying to help them better understand the things they *already* believe in, but this is lost on them because they assume that any new perspective poses a threat to their strongly held religious and moral worldviews. As such, Socrates demonstrates how reluctant people are to embrace new ways of thinking, especially when those new ways of thinking require humility, intellectual inquiry, and genuine self-reflection.

Not long after beginning his *apologia* (or defense), Socrates says that powerful men like Meletus think he has used his philosopher's knowledge to spread confusion. This, Socrates assures the jury, is not true, as he claims to "know nothing at all" about anything that might challenge the conventional systems of belief that prevail throughout Athens. Playing devil's advocate to himself, he continues by saying, "One of you might perhaps interrupt me and say: 'But Socrates, what is your occupation? From where have these slanders come? For surely if you did not busy yourself with something out of the common, all these rumors and talk would not have arisen unless you did something other than most people.'" This is an important moment, as Socrates highlights the fact that his accusers are concerned about whether or not he has done "something other than most people." Simply put, people like Meletus are troubled by the mere idea that a person might act as an individual thinker. As such, they are wary of the fact that Socrates is a philosopher, since this means his job is to question the ways in which people perceive the world.

In a cunning rhetorical move, Socrates acknowledges that his worldview is indeed "out of the common," but he does this as a way of refuting the idea that he holds alternative religious beliefs (an important point, since one of the accusations against him is that he's impious). Indeed, he tells the jury that "the god at Delphi" told his friend, Chaerephon, that no man is wiser than him (Socrates). Wanting to "investigate" this claim, Socrates visited a man he knew to be much wiser than himself, but after listening to him speak, was startled to find that this man wasn't actually very knowledgeable at all. "I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not," Socrates explains to the jury. "I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not. As a result he came to dislike me, and so did many of the bystanders. So I withdrew and thought to myself: '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 know [...] I do not think I know what I do not know." Socrates's willingness to embrace his own ignorance is precisely what makes him the wisest man in Athens. Ironically, though, this self-reflexivity actually *does* render his worldview "out of the common," as it encourages him to go through the city and prove to the supposedly wisest men that they are not, in fact, very wise. In turn, it's easy to see why his accusers have interpreted his contrarian spirit as a challenge to the community's structures of belief.

Because Socrates sets out to show his fellow Athenians their own ignorance, they assume he is challenging their firmly established beliefs, when in reality he is only challenging their vanity. Indeed, he believes there is value in recognizing one's own ignorance. "What is probable, gentlemen," he says to the jury, "is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing." Rather than trying to convince his fellow citizens to embrace entirely new worldviews, he simply encourages them to admit the fact that "human wisdom" is by nature faulty and flawed. It's worth noting that this is in fact a very pious opinion, since Socrates is saying that only gods can possesses a valuable kind of wisdom. "So even now I continue this investigation as the god bade me," he continues, "and I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise." By outlining the fact that he wants to "assist" the Delphic god, Socrates upholds that his views—which his accusers find challenging and, thus, impious—are actually quite religious.

Far from disputing the structures of belief upon which Athenians place so much importance, then, Socrates's seemingly critical viewpoints are fueled by a desire to piously carry out a religious mission that would, if embraced city-wide, only bring Athenians closer to the kind of intellectual and religious enlightenment they claim to believe in so ardently. Unfortunately, the jury proves itself incapable of embracing Socrates's ideas, thereby proving that humans are often too set in their ways to accept new perspectives—even when those perspectives ultimately seek to reinforce their own beliefs.

MORAL INTEGRITY

Socrates believes so strongly in preserving his moral standards that he's willing to sacrifice his own safety and wellbeing on their behalf. Although the jury threatens him with the death penalty, he refuses to betray his values, instead using his unfortunate situation as an opportunity to teach others the importance of moral integrity. In turn, he demonstrates his unfailing confidence in the way he lives his life. After all, he has been brought to court in the first place because he isn't afraid to voice unpopular opinions that challenge his fellow Athenians. As such, it would be out of step with his entire mode of being if he were to suddenly undermine his moral certitude by absolving himself and telling the jury what it wants to hear. What's more, when he argues that he shouldn't be sentenced to death, he doesn't do so for his own benefit—for that would go against his values—but rather for the benefit of all Athenians, saying that he is delivering his

defense because he doesn't want the jury to commit an immoral and harmful act by executing him. In this way, he not only demonstrates his integrity, but also forces the jury to reckon with its own duty to set forth an unflawed model of justice. By making this argument, he proves that true moral integrity means acting ethically not only as an individual, but also as a member of society.

Socrates makes it overwhelmingly clear in his defense that he will not betray his values. Although the accusations made against him by Meletus and Anytus put him in grave danger, he refuses to accept the idea that he has behaved immorally by encouraging Athenians to question their ways. In other words, even under threat of death, he acts according to his moral compass. "This is the truth of the matter, Men of Athens: wherever a man has taken a position that he believes to be best, or has been placed by his commander, there he must I think remain and face danger without a thought for death or anything else, rather than disgrace," he says. Although he goes on to reference several military battles, it's worth considering his idea of being "placed" in a certain position by a "commander." In this case, this "commander" is no doubt the god at Delphi, whose insight about the nature of wisdom Socrates has spread throughout Athens. Indeed, Socrates believes that "there is no greater blessing for the city than [his] service to the god"—a service he renders by enlightening his fellow Athenians despite the fact that people like Meletus and Anytus want to execute him for doing so. Death, Socrates argues, is not something a person should think about when considering the most moral or virtuous way to act. As such, he does not apologize in court for his actions, thereby proving the strength of his moral integrity.

Not only does Socrates insist that the threat of death will not make him recant his ways, he also upholds that he will continue to enforce his values if the jury acquits him. He explains Anytus's belief that, now that Socrates has been brought to court, the jury "cannot avoid executing" him. "For if I should be acquitted," he says, "your sons would practice the teachings of Socrates and all be thoroughly corrupted." This, it seems, is one of his accusers' greatest fears: that he will "corrupt" the youth. However, Socrates believes so adamantly in the morality of his "teachings" that he refuses to give them up under any circumstances.

To illustrate this point, he says, "If you said to me in this regard: 'Socrates, we do not believe Anytus now; we acquit you, but only on condition that you spend no more time on this investigation and do not practice philosophy […] I would say to you: 'Men of Athens, I am grateful and I am your friend, but I will obey the god rather than you, and as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practice philosophy […]." This, Socrates insists, is because he believes his ideas benefit society, and though his detractors disagree, nothing—except, perhaps, a divine sign to the contrary—will stop him from rendering this service to the community.

Socrates's commitment to improving society becomes all the more apparent when he suggests that he's only defending himself to preserve the jury's moral integrity. "I am far from making a defense now on my own behalf, as might be thought, but on yours," he says, "to prevent you from wrongdoing by mistreating the god's gift to you by condemning me; for if you kill me you will not easily find another like me." Going on, he implies that Athenians need someone who will challenge them to improve like he himself has challenged them. Indeed, Socrates cares so strongly about the welfare of his fellow Athenians that he is willing to risk his own life and reputation in order to help them see their own flaws, and this is something very few people are prepared to do.

As such, Socrates sacrifices himself for the very people who now seek to punish him, seeing his trial not as an opportunity to save himself, but as an opportunity to teach the jury the value of moral integrity. This is why he calls no witnesses to testify on his behalf, nor does he break down in tears and apologize for his actions. In the name of teaching the jury important moral lessons, he says, "It is not difficult to avoid death, gentleman: it is much more difficult to avoid wickedness." Indeed, this "wickedness" is what Socrates has tried so hard to help his community members avoid, a selfless effort that—above all—underlines the importance of contributing to society's overall morality, even when this means standing in opposition to the community's prevailing beliefs or practices.

RHETORIC, PERSUASION, AND THE TRUTH

Although Socrates is quite convincing in his *apologia*, he insists that he is not using rhetorical trickery to deceive the jury. Rather, he simply follows each accusation to its logical conclusion, which often contradicts some previously established assertion. By questioning Meletus and forcing him to grapple with the incongruities that exist within his arguments, Socrates uses a simple form of dialectical rhetoric that ultimately advocates for the unadorned pursuit of honesty and truth. Indeed, rather than using complex modes of persuasion, he straightforwardly thinks through each line of thought in order to assess its veracity. At the same time, though, this is in and of itself a clever rhetorical move, as Socrates's seemingly unassuming investigations invariably confound Meletus and reveal his deceitfulness. And yet, unlike his detractors, Socrates has no ulterior motives, meaning that his rhetorical calculations are in the service of a greater good, which has only to do with uncovering the truth. In turn, Socrates implies that the only truly rhetorically sound—and just—argument is that which genuinely strives to find the truth.

Socrates begins his defense by calling attention to the manner in which his accusers use language and rhetoric. "I do not know, men of Athens, how my accusers affected you: as for me, I was almost carried away in spite of myself, so persuasively did they

speak," he says. This attention to language is exactly the kind of observation he is accustomed to making, as he has made a name for himself by traveling through Athens and forcing supposedly wise men to apply a higher level of scrutiny to their own thoughts and words. When he says that he "was almost carried away in spite of" himself, he addresses the fact that skilled speakers can often convince listeners to forget their own beliefs. Even Socrates—who has ample reason to disagree with what Meletus and his other accusers have said—can't help but get swept up in the dizzying logic of his detractors' statements.

Interestingly enough, he points out, this is exactly the kind of confounding rhetorical finesse of which he himself stands accused. "Of the many lies they told, one in particular surprised me," Socrates says to the jury, "namely that you should be careful not to be deceived by an accomplished speaker like me." In this moment, Socrates intimates that Meletus and his cronies are themselves guilty of using persuasive techniques to trick people into getting "carried away in spite of [themselves]." In turn, Socrates begins his defense by highlighting the inherent hypocrisy of his accusers and their manipulative ways.

In order to establish that he—unlike his accusers—doesn't use complex rhetorical devices to confound or deceive his interlocutors, Socrates makes a point of clarifying the nature of his persuasive skills. To that end, he says it is false that he is an "accomplished speaker," expressing his surprise at the fact that his accusers don't mind being proved wrong by his simple way of addressing the jury. "That [my accusers] were not ashamed to be immediately proved wrong by the facts, when I show myself not to be an accomplished speaker at all, that I thought was most shameless on their part—unless indeed they call an accomplished speaker the man who speaks the truth." It's critical to note that Socrates calls his accusers "shameless" for not minding that they will be "proved wrong by the facts." By saying this, he implies that any argument that can be falsified this easily is something that should bring shame and dishonor to a person. In turn, his listeners—and Plato's readers—are forced to consider that the apparent persuasiveness of his accusers' arguments has nothing to do with the veracity of their claims. "From me you will hear the whole truth, though not [...] expressed in embroidered and stylized phrases like theirs," Socrates adds, suggesting that his accusers use rhetorical techniques that have nothing to do with "truth" and everything to do with "style."

At certain points in his defense, Socrates addresses Meletus directly, asking him a series of questions in order to uncover the flaws in his arguments. For example, he addresses the fact that Meletus has accused him of not believing in the gods "in whom the city believes," asking Meletus to clarify whether or not he thinks Socrates doesn't "believe in gods at all." In response, Meletus confirms that this is what he means, and so Socrates asks, "Does any man believe in spiritual activities who does not believe in spirits?" When Meletus answers by saying no man can believe in "spiritual activities" without believing in spirits, Socrates says, "Now you say that I believe in spiritual things and teach about them [...] But if I believe in spiritual things I must quite inevitably believe in spirts." Going on, he gets Meletus to admit that Athenians commonly consider "spirits to be either gods or the children of gods." "Then since I do believe in spirits, as you admit, if spirits are gods, this is what I mean when I say you speak in riddles and in jest, as you state that I do not believe in gods and then again that I do, since I do believe in spirits," Socrates adds, ultimately revealing the contradictions embedded in Meletus's claims.

Furthermore, Socrates also finds a contradiction in Meletus's statement that he (Socrates) corrupts the youth of Athens. "[Meletus] says that I am guilty of corrupting the young, but I say that [he] is guilty of dealing frivolously with serious matters, of irresponsibly bringing people into court, and of professing to be seriously concerned with things about none of which he has ever cared," Socrates says. In this this way, he once again shames Meletus for setting forth flawed arguments aimed not at finding the truth of a matter, but at disseminating slander. Whereas Socrates himself only uses persuasive techniques in order to help his interlocutors better understand their own viewpoints, Meletus employs faulty rhetoric for ignoble purposes. And considering that Socrates's arguments remain the only ones that are both persuasive and logically sound, it's easy to see that the only solid form of rhetoric is that which concerns itself first and foremost with uplifting the truth.

DEMOCRACY, JUDGMENT, AND JUSTICE

In his *apologia*, Socrates suggests that the truth—along with the Athenian judicial system—ought not to be denigrated by deceit and frivolity. However, he also suggests that "a man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public life." This is because he believes it's nearly impossible to "survive" as an honest person while participating in public affairs, thereby hinting at the fact that, though he respects the importance of the surrounding democratic institutions, he doesn't think Athens has succeeded thus far in holding itself to its own standards. Nonetheless, he abides by the jury's conviction, ultimately demonstrating his willingness to adhere to the current judicial system despite its many flaws. In this way, Socrates proves that it's possible to be staunchly critical of something and nevertheless believe in it. In fact, his actions hint at the fact that criticism and disagreement are actually indications of just how much a person cares about something, since only those who are truly committed to a certain worldview or institution are willing to take the time to examine it thoughtfully.

When Socrates first begins his defense, he makes a point of addressing the jury as the "men of Athens." In doing so, he

reminds his listeners not only that they are his fellow citizens, but that they have been assembled to determine what's best for their polis, Athens. To understand the significance of the jurors' duty to Athens itself, it's helpful to consider editor John M. Cooper's footnote, which appears at the beginning of Socrates's defense in Hackett Publishing's 2002 version of the text. "Jurors were selected by lot from all the male citizens thirty years of age or older who offered themselves on the given day for service," Cooper writes. "They thus functioned as representatives of the Athenian people and the Athenian democracy. In cases like Socrates', they judged on behalf of the whole citizen body whether or not their interests had been undermined by the accused's behavior." In light of this, it makes sense that Socrates goes out of his way to remind the jurors that they are representatives of "the Athenian people," since this is a subtle way of encouraging them to consider the fact that they are the backbone of the city's democratic system. After all, democracy is a mode of governance that allows for disagreement and free thinking. As such, Socrates frames his attempt to challenge the city's most complacent intellectuals as nothing more than a free-thinking effort to improve Athens—something the jurors should understand, since they themselves are also presumably working to maintain a healthy democracy.

Just before Socrates receives the death penalty, he explains why he hasn't called in witnesses to speak on his behalf and why he hasn't broken into tears and apologized for his actions. Simply put, he respects the process of judgment and the pursuit of truth too much to denigrate it by doing anything other than honestly presenting his case. "It is not the purpose of a juryman's office to give justice as a favor to whoever seems good to him, but to judge according to law, and this he has sworn to do," he says. "We should not accustom you to perjure yourselves, nor should you make a habit of it." In this moment, Socrates acknowledges that using emotionally manipulative tactics may very well have made it easier for him to escape this trial unharmed. However, he believes that doing this would not only demean himself, but put the jurors in "a habit of" going against all that their polis stands for: justice according to the law. This is something he's unwilling to do. Rather, he would prefer to abide by the honest assessment of the jurors—despite what they may decide—because this is the only way to respect the system of governance in which he and his fellow Athenians currently exist.

It's worth noting that there is much debate in the scholarly community about whether or not Socrates believed in democracy. Many uphold that he was against this mode of governance because of the grave misgivings he expresses in Plato's *The Republic*. However, others believe these ideas belong more to Plato than to Socrates himself, since *The Republic* was written long after Socrates's death. In *Apology*, on the other hand, Socrates is critical of the ways in which his fellow Athenians are running the democracy, but he isn't necessarily critical of democracy itself. Simply put, his criticism can actually be read as an indication that he wants this mode of governance to succeed.

In *Apology*, Socrates does not hesitate to express his doubts about the current state of affairs, and this is the exact kind of thinking that led to his trial in the first place, since he refuses to shy away from criticizing what he sees as imperfect. As such, he now voices his opinion that the present political climate is unfit for honest individuals. Explaining why he has neglected throughout his life to accept a role as an orator or other official, he says, "A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time." Going on, he says that honesty is incompatible with the way public officials are expected to behave. "Do you think I would have survived all these years if I were engaged in public affairs and, acting as a good man must, came to the help of justice and considered this the most important thing?" he asks. "Far from it, men of Athens, nor would any other man." By saying this, he asserts that the men currently running the polis do not consider justice "the most important thing."

In this way, Socrates maintains that Athens is corrupt and failing to live up to its potential as a just and honest democracy. And yet, he still has no qualms about accepting the jury's conclusion to sentence him to death, thereby suggesting that he respects this model of governance at least enough to abide by it even when he knows it is flawed. In turn, he demonstrates that respecting something does not preclude one from criticizing it, and vice versa.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE GADFLY

At a certain point in his defense, Socrates refers to himself as a gadfly as a way of representing the fact that his philosophical investigations are annoying but necessary to the moral health of Athens. To illustrate this point, he says, "I was attached to this city by the god […] as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly." It's worth noting here that although Socrates says the "horse" that the gadfly "stir[s]" is "somewhat sluggish," he also suggests that it is "noble." As such, he implies that the animal possesses great potential—potential that need only be reawakened. This, it seems, is what Socrates himself does for his fellow Athenians: he "rouse[s]" their virtue by forcing them to reckon with their own shortcomings. As such, they see him as a nuisance, a social gadfly that won't leave them alone. By presenting this

metaphor involving the gadfly and the horse, though, Socrates reminds the jury that his seemingly annoying behavior ultimately benefits society by forcing people to try harder to embody virtuousness.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hackett edition of *Plato: Five Dialogues* published in 2002.

Apology Quotes

I do not know, men of Athens, how my accusers affected you; as for me, I was almost carried away in spite of myself, so persuasively did they speak. And yet, hardly anything of what they said is true. Of the many lies they told, one in particular surprised me, namely that you should be careful not to be deceived by an accomplished speaker like me. That they were not ashamed to be immediately proved wrong by the facts, when I show myself not to be an accomplished speaker at all, that I thought was most shameless on their part—unless indeed they call an accomplished speaker the man who speaks the truth. If they mean that, I would agree that I am an orator, but not after their manner, for indeed, as I say, practically nothing they said was true. From me you will hear the whole truth, though not, by Zeus, gentlemen, expressed in embroidered and stylized phrases like theirs, but things spoken at random and expressed in the first words that come to mind, for I put my trust in the justice of what I say, and let none of you expect anything else.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

These are the opening words of Socrates' *apologia*. Right from the beginning of his defense, then, he makes it clear to the jurors that he is not using any kind of persuasive trickery or complicated rhetoric. His accusers, on the other hand, have told "many lies" about him and have used "embroidered and stylized phrases" to mask the flaws in their arguments. By calling attention to this kind of deception, Socrates frames himself as a morally upstanding and unwavering person who cares first and foremost about pursuing honesty. This is why he has decided to use straightforward language. Indeed, because he is telling the truth, he doesn't need to dress his words up; instead he puts his "trust in the justice of what [he] says" and pays no attention to anything else.

This is my first appearance in a lawcourt, at the age of seventy; I am therefore simply a stranger to the manner of speaking here. Just as if I were really a stranger, you would certainly excuse me if I spoke in that dialect and manner in which I had been brought up, so too my present request seems a just one, for you to pay no attention to my manner of speech—be it better or worse—but to concentrate your attention on whether what I say is just or not, for the excellence of a judge lies in this, as that of a speaker lies in telling the truth.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Again, Socrates emphasizes the fact that he is unaccustomed to using complex or fanciful rhetorical language. Instead, he says, he will speak in the "dialect and manner in which" he has been "brought up." In turn, he hopes the jury will not hold the simplicity of his language against him, since he is "a stranger to the manner of speaking" that jurors are generally accustomed to hearing in court. Of course, it seems rather obvious that Socrates—a very intelligent philosopher—is purposefully underselling himself, since he's most likely perfectly capable of employing the kind of language that's customary in court. Nevertheless, Socrates accentuates his own ignorance as a way of showing the jury that he is only concerned with telling the truth, not with speaking in riddles and purposefully deceiving his listeners. In turn, he underhandedly suggests that, unlike his detractors, he is committed to presenting himself honestly, for he believes that "the excellence" of "a speaker lies in telling the truth."

What is the accusation from which arose the slander in which Meletus trusted when he wrote out the charge against me? What did they say when they slandered me? I must, as if they were my actual prosecutors, read the affidavit they would have sworn. It goes something like this: Socrates is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse into the stronger argument, and he teaches these same things to others. You have seen this yourself in the comedy of Aristophanes, a Socrates swinging about there, saying he was walking on air and talking a lot of other nonsense about things of which I know nothing at all.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Aristophanes, Meletus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Socrates outlines the charges made against him by a number of unnamed accusers—charges that Meletus has trusted and thus brought to court alongside his own accusations. In his defense, Socrates chooses to reiterate these accusations, ultimately creating a kind of dialogue within his own speech. This, it's easy to see, enables him to proceed as he normally does when it comes to investigating the truth. In other words, by repeating the charges made against him, he's able to slowly and methodically take issue with the various flaws and inaccuracies that arise once he applies intellectual pressure to them.

When Socrates says, "You have seen this yourself in the comedy of Aristophanes," he is referring to a play called *The Clouds*, in which he appears as a swindling, dishonest philosophical teacher. In this representation, Socrates resembles the Sophists, a group of teachers who charged large sums and taught young men how to debate. Although very little writing about the Sophists survives, it seems likely that Athenians had a negative association with these teachers, since they—or Plato, at the very least—believed the Sophists were dishonest and manipulative. By referencing Aristophanes' inaccurate representation of him, then, Socrates tries to point out that the jurors have been unfairly biased against him.

One of you might perhaps interrupt me and say: "But Socrates, what is your occupation? From where have these slanders come? For surely if you did not busy yourself with something out of the common, all these rumors and talk would not have arisen unless you did something other than most people. Tell us what it is, that we may not speak inadvisedly about you." Anyone who says that seems to be right, and I will try to show you what has caused this reputation and slander. Listen then. Perhaps some of you will think I am jesting, but be sure that all that I shall say is true. What has caused my reputation is none other than a certain kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom? Human wisdom, perhaps.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Meletus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

After refuting the notion that he is a Sophist who has accepted money to teach the sons of rich men, Socrates once again speaks as if he's having a dialogue, this time asking himself where, exactly, "these slanders" have originated. "For surely if you did not busy yourself with something out of the common, all these rumors and talk would not have arisen," he says, pretending to be one of the jurors. By saying this, Socrates illustrates just how uncomfortable his fellow Athenians are with the idea of someone acting "out of the common." In other words, he knows that the members of the jury are wary of people who don't unquestioningly conform to what Athenian society deems acceptable behavior. What's more, Socrates understands that his role as a philosopher has led him to interrogate the conventions that prevail in his city. Nonetheless, he upholds that his unseemly reputation comes from the fact that he possesses a certain kind of "human wisdom." In turn, he implies that his fellow Athenians do not possess this "wisdom," for if they did, they wouldn't think of him as a suspicious outlier.

> I went to one of those reputed wise, thinking that there, if anywhere, I could refute the oracle and say to it: "This man is wiser than I, but you said I was." Then, when I examined this man—there is no need for me to tell you his name, he was one of our public men—my experience was something like this: I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not. As a result he came to dislike me, and so did many of the bystanders. So I withdrew and thought to myself: "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 know; 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." After this I approached another man, one of those thought to be wiser than he, and I thought the same thing, and so I came to be disliked both by him and by many others.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), The Delphic Oracle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

After Socrates hears from the Delphic oracle that no one is wiser than him, he sets out to test the idea. To do so, he visits an Athenian politician, but soon realizes this man is not, in fact, all that wise. Instead, this politician is simply vain, as he thinks very highly of his own intellectual capacity. Seeing this, Socrates begins to understand that he actually *is* wiser than this politician, thereby confirming—in this case, at least—the Delphic oracle's previous assertion. Of course, Socrates is someone who wants to help the people around him improve, which is why he tries "to show [the politician] that he thought himself wise, but that he was not." Unsurprisingly, this upset the politician, who clearly would prefer to continue thinking highly of himself.

This entire ordeal encourages Socrates to consider the nature of his own knowledge, realizing that he is wise only because he is willing to admit his own intellectual insufficiencies. In turn, he presents human knowledge as something that is often superficial and blinding, since expertise in a certain field seems to frequently blind people to the fact that they don't possess more profound kinds of wisdom.

> Finally I went to the craftsmen, for I was conscious of knowing practically nothing, and I knew that I would find that they had knowledge of many fine things. In this I was not mistaken; they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, men of Athens, the good craftsmen seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets: each of them, because of his success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had, so that I asked myself, on behalf of the oracle, whether I should prefer to be as I am, with neither their wisdom nor their ignorance, or to have both. The answer I gave myself and the oracle was that it was to my advantage to be as I am.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), The Delphic Oracle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Once Socrates understands that the only truly valuable piece of wisdom a person can possess is the notion that he or she isn't wise at all, he seeks to test this theory by visiting various experts throughout Athens. After finding that the poets suffer from the same problem—intellectual vanity—as the politician, he speaks to the city's craftsmen, for he's sure these men know many things he himself does not. And though he discovers he's right to think this, he also finds that this very knowledge leads the craftsmen to think themselves "very wise in other most important pursuits." This, Socrates upholds, is an error, since the craftsmen's knowledge of carpentry ultimately has no influence on their overall wisdom. As such, he suggests that it is better to recognize one's own lack of knowledge than to assume that expertise in one area gives a person an overall sense of wisdom.

> As a result of this investigation, men of Athens, I acquired much unpopularity, of a kind that is hard to deal with and is a heavy burden; many slanders came from these people and a reputation for wisdom, for in each case the bystanders thought that I myself possessed the wisdom that I proved that my interlocutor did not have. What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, Socrates, 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." So even now I continue this investigation as the god bade me—and I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), The Delphic Oracle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Socrates explains to the jury why he has earned such an unfavorable reputation. He has, after all, gone through the city and "acquired much unpopularity" by forcing supposedly wise men to grapple with their own intellectual shortcomings. Indeed, he believes strongly that the Delphic oracle's message has very little to do with his own intellectual capacity. Instead, he upholds that the oracle merely recognizes that he is the only person in Athens willing to admit his own ignorance, since he "understands that his wisdom is worthless." To spread this message, he has had to make a number of enemies, as people resent his attempt to show them that they are "not wise." And yet, Socrates continues to do this, for he believes that "the god bade" him to show his fellow Athenians that their knowledge isn't as profound as they might otherwise think. By saying that "the god bade" him to do this work, Socrates portrays himself as a deeply pious man—an important detail, considering the fact that he stands accused of impiety.

> Either I do not corrupt the young or, if I do, it is unwillingly, and you are lying in either case. Now if I corrupt them unwillingly, the law does not require you to bring people to court for such unwilling wrong doings, but to get hold of them privately, to instruct them and exhort them; for clearly, if I learn better, I shall cease to do what I am doing unwillingly. You, however, have avoided my company and were unwilling to instruct me, but you bring me here, where the law requires one to bring those who are in need of punishment, not of instruction.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Meletus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Socrates addresses these words to Meletus after he has begun to closely examine the accusations made against him. Through a series of pointed but straightforward questions, Socrates successfully proves that even Meletus can't truly believe he has purposefully "corrupt[ed] the young." As such, he says, "Either I do not corrupt the young or, if I do, it is unwillingly." Going on, he points out that committing accidental offenses is not something that deserves punishment, but rather something that should invite thoughtful guidance and "instruction." In turn, Socrates frames the legal accusations against him as inappropriate and unnecessary. What's more, he also underlines the importance of education, ultimately providing a real life example of why it's critical that Athenians help one another learn from their mistakes. This, he implies, is what he's been doing by encouraging supposedly wise men to admit their own ignorance. Unfortunately, people like Meletus don't seem to understand this. Or, more likely, they *do* understand this but simply wish to slander Socrates because he has challenged their vanity.

> Does any man, Meletus, believe in human activities who does not believe in humans? [...] Does any man who does not believe in horses believe in horsemen's activities? Or in flute-playing activities but not in flute-players? No, my good sir, no man could. If you are not willing to answer, I will tell you and these men. Answer the next question, however. Does any man believe in spiritual activities who does not believe in spirits? — No one.

Thank you for answering, if reluctantly, when these gentlemen made you. Now you say that I believe in spiritual things and teach about them, whether new or old, but at any rate spiritual things according to what you say, and to this you have sworn in your deposition. But if I believe in spiritual things I must quite inevitably believe in spirits. Is that not so? It is indeed. I shall assume that you agree, as you do not answer. Do we not believe spirits to be either gods or the children of gods? Yes or no? — Of course.

Then since I do believe in spirits, as you admit, if spirits are gods, this is what I mean when I say you speak in riddles and in jest, as you state that I do not believe in gods and then again that I do, since I do believe in spirits.

Related Characters: Meletus, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

This is a perfect example of a Socratic dialogue, in which Socrates asks his interlocutor simple questions that eventually reveal inescapable contradictions. In this moment, Socrates seeks to prove that he believes in the same gods his fellow Athenians believe in. To do this, he asks Meletus whether or not it's possible to "believe in spiritual activities" without believing in "spirits." When Meletus says that this isn't possible (his responses are indicated by dashes in this version of the text), Socrates reminds him that Athenians "believe spirits to be either gods or the children of gods." Of course, Meletus agrees with this, and so Socrates is easily able to unearth the contradiction lurking in Meletus' accusation—namely that a belief in spirits necessitates a belief in the gods. And since Meletus has previously asserted that he thinks Socrates believes in spirits, it becomes clear that Socrates must also believe in the gods. In this way, Socrates uses Meletus's own words to make his defense, ultimately demonstrating to the jury that the charges against him are unfounded and illogical.

> To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know. It is perhaps on this point and in this respect, gentlemen, that I differ from the majority of men, and if I were to claim that I am wiser than anyone in anything, it would be in this, that, as I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not think I have. I do know, however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, be he god or man. I shall never fear or avoid things of which I do not know, whether they may not be good rather than things that I know to be bad.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

By this point in his defense, Socrates has already established that he disapproves of the human tendency to deny ignorance. Indeed, he has taken it upon himself to show his fellow Athenians the extent of their intellectual shortcomings, trying hard to get them to admit that knowledge or expertise in one area of life doesn't make them wise in all other areas. As such, it makes sense that he doesn't presume to "fear death," about which he knows very little. "No one knows whether death may be the greatest of all blessings for a man," he says, "yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils." This, he suggests, is a "blameworthy ignorance," since people often behave according to this foolish fear of death. In this way, their ignorance informs their actions—something Socrates thinks is shameful, since he believes people should act according to their values.

In keeping with this, he says, "it is wicked and shameful to do wrong," adding that he will "never fear or avoid things of which [he does] not know," since this might mean acting "wicked[ly]." After all, if he were to fear death, he would likely lie during his *apologia* and try to satisfy the jury, thereby avoiding the death penalty. However, since he embraces the unknowability of death, he doesn't fear it, and this enables him to adhere to his moral integrity.

> […] if you said to me in this regard: "Socrates, we do not believe Anytus now; we acquit you, but only on condition that you spend no more time on this investigation and do not practice philosophy, and if you are caught doing so you will die"; if, as I say, you were to acquit me on those terms, I would say to you: "Men of Athens, I am grateful and I am your friend, but I will obey the god rather than you, and as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practice philosophy […]."

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Anytus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, Socrates demonstrates the strength of his moral integrity, this time assuring the jurors that he will not change his ways even if they spare his life. This is a bold move, one that must certainly aggravate anyone in the jury who doesn't want to kill Socrates but also wants to put an end to his philosophical "investigation[s]." However, Socrates doesn't allow himself to be influenced by the threat of death, and the fact that he speaks so straightforwardly in this moment only emphasizes the extent to which he's committed to presenting himself honestly. After all, it's quite likely that he could avoid the death sentence if only he promised to stop practicing philosophy, but this is not an option for him, and he has no qualms about saying this to the men who will decide his fate. Furthermore, he believes his "investigation[s]" are in the service of "the god," an idea that once again underlines his piety and commitment to religion.

> Indeed, men of Athens, I am far from making a defense now on my own behalf, as might be thought, but on yours, to prevent you from wrongdoing by mistreating the god's gift to you by condemning me; for if you kill me you will not easily find another like me. I was attached to this city by the god—though it seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Socrates suggests that he is delivering this *apologia* not for his own sake, but for the sake of the jury members, since he fears they will commit a "wrongdoing" if they decide to "condemn" him to death. Since he sees himself as a "gift" from the gods, he believes that killing him would be an impious act, one that would disrespect the religious beliefs about which his fellow Athenians claim to care so much. "I was attached to this city by the god," he says, presenting himself as a "gadfly" that "stir[s]" a "sluggish" horse that would otherwise be "noble" if not for its own laziness. In turn, he once again addresses the fact that his philosophical investigations are widely unpopular, acknowledging that people dislike him and see him as a nuisance because he "never cease[s] to rouse" them. However, he insists that he only behaves like this because he cares about Athens, simply wanting his contemporaries to behave virtuously. In keeping with this good will, he also doesn't want them to harm themselves by killing him and thus wading into wickedness.

> Quite apart from the question of reputation, gentlemen, I do not think it right to supplicate the jury and to be acquitted because of this, but to teach and persuade them. It is not the purpose of a juryman's office to give justice as a favor to whoever seems good to him, but to judge according to law, and this he has sworn to do. We should not accustom you to perjure yourselves, nor should you make a habit of it. This is irreverent conduct for either of us.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Socrates says this in order to explain to the jury why he hasn't called his sons to court, cried, or pled hysterically for acquittal. Although he recognizes that many reputable men have behaved like this in court, he himself refuses because he does "not think it right to supplicate the jury and to be acquitted because of" such behavior. Rather, he sees this moment as an opportunity to "teach and persuade" the jurors. Indeed, this is what he has been doing by walking

them through his beliefs about wisdom and moral integrity. In addition, he believes that trying to "supplicate the jury" would only harm his fellow Athenians, as it would put them in the habit of "perjur[ing]" themselves by making ethical decisions based not on the facts of a given case, but on emotionally manipulative rhetoric. In other words, Socrates respects the pursuit of truth and justice too much to demean this judicial process by making an appeal to the jurors' emotions.

> Perhaps someone might say: But Socrates, if you leave us will you
> not be able to live quietly, without talking? Now this is the most difficult
> point on which to convince some of you. If I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will
> not believe me and will think I am being ironical. On the other hand,
> if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day
> and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men, you will believe me even less.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker)

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Explanation and Analysis

Anticipating that the jurors will find it absurd that he's unwilling to "live quietly" in order to save his own life, Socrates tries to explain why he will never stop carrying out his philosophical investigations. Despite his efforts to prove to his fellow Athenians that it would be "impossible" for him to "keep quiet because that [would mean] disobeying the god," he acknowledges the sad fact that the jurors will seemingly never believe him. Still, though, he insists that "it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day," a principle he takes to heart because he believes that "the unexamined life is not worth living."

In keeping with this belief, it becomes obvious that he's unlikely to give up his philosophical inquiries simply because the people around him disagree that it is important to "examine" and interrogate that which is usually ignored. According to this worldview, intellectual rigor isn't simply part of being alive, but actually *defines* what it means to lead a purposeful life. Unfortunately, though, Socrates's contemporaries actually celebrate the "unexamined life," for avoiding philosophical debate enables them to ignore their own intellectual shortcomings and thus bask in their vanity. In turn, Socrates understands that the jurors will "believe [him] even less" when he outlines the importance of "discuss[ing] virtue every day," though he still tries to convince them of this idea.

> I was convicted because I lacked not words but boldness and shamelessness and the willingness to say to you what you would most gladly have heard from me, lamentations and tears and my saying and doing many things that I say are unworthy of me but that you are accustomed to hear from others. I did not think then that the danger I ran should make me do anything mean, nor do I now regret the nature of my defense. I would much rather die after this kind of defense than live after making the other kind.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Socrates is sentenced to death. Rather than expressing anger, Socrates points out that he could easily have avoided this outcome by saying things to the jury that they "would most gladly have heard"—namely, "lamentations and tears" that may have appealed to their emotions. This, of course, would have been rhetorically manipulative, as such behavior relies upon a kind of persuasion that has nothing to do with honesty or virtue. This is precisely why Socrates was unwilling to act like this, since he believes doing so would have been shameful. Furthermore, when he says that he does not "regret the nature of [his] defense," he once again demonstrates his unyielding sense of morality, adding that he would "much rather die after this kind of defense than live after" making a mockery not only of himself, but of the truth itself.

> It is not difficult to avoid death, gentlemen; it is much more difficult to avoid wickedness, for it runs faster than death. Slow and elderly as I am, I have been caught by the slower pursuer, whereas my accusers, being clever and sharp, have been caught by the quicker, wickedness. I leave you now, condemned to death by you, but they are condemned by truth to wickedness and injustice. So I maintain my assessment, and they maintain theirs.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, Socrates stresses the fact that death is not something to fear, this time suggesting that it is "not difficult to avoid." Indeed, if he were to have "supplicate[d]" the jury by crying and pleading, he may well have avoided the death penalty. And yet, he knows this would be futile, since he is bound to die someday anyway. As such, he would much rather uphold his values by staying true to his moral integrity. The jurors, on the other hand, must now reckon with the fact that they have sentenced an innocent man to death based on petty, slanderous, and logically unsound accusations. This is why Socrates says that the jurors have been "condemned by truth to wickedness and injustice," ultimately implying that their dishonesty will no doubt lead them into trouble in the long run.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

APOLOGY

Socrates begins his *apologia* by calling the jury "men of Athens," wondering aloud how his accusers have "affected" them. "As for me," he says, "I was almost carried away in spite of myself, so persuasively did they speak. And yet, hardly anything of what they said is true." Of all the things his accusers have said about him, he upholds, the most startling is that they have warned the jury to "be careful not to be deceived by an accomplished speaker" like Socrates. "That they were not ashamed to be immediately proved wrong by the facts, when I show myself not to be an accomplished speaker at all, that I thought was most shameless on their part," he says, adding, "unless indeed they call an accomplished speaker the man who speaks the truth."

Socrates' defense—or apologia, *in Ancient Greek—begins after his accusers have read the deposition outlining the charges against him. As such,* Apology *is only a partial document of the entire trial, though Socrates meticulously addresses each of his detractors' arguments, thereby making it easy to intuit what they've said about him. By using the phrase "men of Athens" to address the jury, he also subtly reminds the jurors that they are representatives of the city's inhabitants, thereby underlining their responsibility to uphold the interests of the city and its commitment to democracy. In turn, he underhandedly discourages them from siding with his accusers for biased reasons that aren't based on what happens in the trial. On another note, it's worth noting that Socrates takes issue with the idea that he's an "accomplished speaker," a small detail that helps him establish his commitment not to rhetoric and persuasion, but to the unadorned truth.*

Socrates notes that if his accusers are insinuating that "an accomplished speaker" is someone who "speaks the truth," then he should be considered an "orator." "From me you will hear the whole truth," he says, "though not, by Zeus, gentlemen, expressed in embroidered and stylized phrases like theirs, but things spoken at random and expressed in the first words that come to mind." This, Socrates says, is because he believes in "the justice of what [he] say[s]." In turn, he has decided not to embellish his language in the name of persuasion, so he asks the jury not to judge him harshly for speaking like he's "in the marketplace." After all, he is seventy years old and has never appeared in court.

Socrates goes out of his way to establish that he won't employ rhetorical trickery to confuse or persuade the jurors. To make this point, he calls attention to the fact that his mode of conversing is actually quite colloquial, the kind of language one might use "in the marketplace." By emphasizing the simplicity of his oratory skills, then, Socrates encourages the jury to focus on what he's about say rather than whether or not he's being deceptive. His accusers, on the other hand, use "embroidered and stylized phrases." In comparison to Socrates's straightforward linguistic style, this affected manner of speaking seems dubious and disingenuous.

Socrates explains to the jury that he is going to address the accusations made against him by his "first accusers," then those made against him by "the later accusers." These first accusers, he explains, are going to be more difficult to argue against than "Anytus and his friends," since they have been slandering him since the jurors were mere children. Indeed, these unidentified people have long upheld that "there is a man called Socrates, a wise man, a student of all things in the sky and below the earth, who makes the worse argument the stronger."

In this moment, Socrates clarifies that there are two groups of people who have accused him. Unfortunately, the first group is a handful of unidentified men who have marred his name over the course of many years. The vagueness and anonymity of this group makes it hard for Socrates to provide a solid defense of himself, as he understands that finding the truth often means closely examining the specifics of a given matter. Since his earliest accusers are not present to answer his questions, though, he cannot interrogate them in his normal fashion, a dialectical mode of questioning now known as the Socratic Method.

Admitting the unfortunate fact that it will be difficult to persuade the jury, Socrates says he must nevertheless "obey the law and make [his] defense." "Let us then take up the case from its beginning," he says. "What is the accusation from which arose the slander in which Meletus trusted when he wrote out the charge against me? […] It goes something like this: Socrates is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse into the stronger argument, and he teaches these same things to others." Indeed, Socrates notes that the jurors have surely seen this unfavorable representation of him in a play by the playwright Aristophanes, who portrayed him as someone "walking on air and talking a lot of other nonsense."

Socrates clearly lays out the charges made against him so that he can systematically address each accusation. He applies this careful and methodical approach because he knows that it is difficult to defend oneself against unknown detractors. As such, he wants to show the jurors that he's concerned first and foremost with finding the truth and doing so in a detailed, organized way. What's more, when he says that he's on trial because of his interest in "studying things in the sky and below the earth," it becomes clear that his fellow Athenians are uncomfortable with the idea of someone who carefully examines their religious beliefs. In keeping with this, they are also wary of rhetorically cunning thinkers who are capable of advancing unconventional arguments. Given that Socrates is a philosopher who takes it upon himself to study the ways in which people think, it's unsurprising that these Athenians would find his intellectual pursuits threatening.

Socrates insists that Aristophanes's portrayal of him is inaccurate, since he doesn't possess the knowledge that his character espouses in the play. Having said this, Socrates urges the jurors to speak up if they've ever heard him talk about the things Aristophanes claims he talks about. Going on, he says that he has never taught people for money. In a tongue-in-cheek manner, he says he has no problem with men who "can go to any city and persuade the young" and charge fees as they do so, but he himself does not possess the "knowledge" necessary to do this.

Socrates goes out of his way to differentiate himself from Aristophanes's representation of him in a play entitled The Clouds, *in which Socrates appears as an intellectual trickster who teaches young men how to argue convincingly against others even when their positions are weak and unsound. It is important for Socrates to establish the fact that he does not engage in this kind of activity, since many Athenians associate him with the Sophists—teachers of philosophy and rhetoric who charge exorbitant sums, take advantage of rich families, and turn their pupils into wordsmiths void of any true sense of morality. This, at least, is the unfavorable opinion held by Plato, though historians and scholars remain uncertain about whether or not all Athenians were this critical of the Sophists. Nonetheless, it's important to understand that Socrates wants to separate himself from the Sophists in the minds of the jurors, as he insists not only that he doesn't accept money for his teachings, but also that he isn't clever enough to make a living in this manner. In turn, he again presents himself as someone who speaks and acts straightforwardly and without rhetorical embroidery.*

Socrates posits that one of the jurors might wish to ask him, "But Socrates, what is your occupation? From where have these slanders come? For surely if you did not busy yourself with something out of the common, all these rumors and talk would not have arisen unless you did something other than most people." Answering this, Socrates says that he has gained his reputation simply because he possesses "human wisdom."

When Socrates anticipates this question from the jury, he emphasizes the extent to which his fellow Athenians are hesitant to embrace anything that is "out of the common." Since he is a free-thinking philosopher who—by virtue of his "occupation"—studies the ways in which people think, it's unsurprising that the jurors would think he engages in activities that are "other than [how] most people" behave. By highlighting this dynamic, he demonstrates just how hesitant these men are to critically examine their own beliefs.

As Socrates says this, the jurors begin to mumble and interrupt, but he tells them to calm down because he isn't "boasting." After all, the story he's about to tell comes from "a trustworthy source." "I shall call upon the god at Delphi as witness to the existence and nature of my wisdom, if it be such," he says, explaining that his friend Chaerephon traveled to the Delphic oracle and asked, "if any man was wiser than [Socrates]." "The Pythian replied that no one was wiser," Socrates says, explaining that when he heard about this, he asked himself, "Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very conscious that I am not wise at all; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest? For surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do so."

The Ancient Greeks believed that the god Apollo spoke directly through a priestess (the "Pythian") who lived in Delphi, which they upheld was the center of the world. Socrates references the Delphic oracle because, as he states in this moment, the Pythian has asserted that there is no one wiser than him. This is important, as it contextualizes Socrates' previous claim that he possesses "human wisdom," which has gained him a certain reputation that his accusers are now using against him. By insisting that the Delphic oracle believes in his wisdom, Socrates ultimately casts himself as a pious man rather than someone who doesn't believe in the gods.

Continuing his story about the Delphic oracle's assertion that no one is wiser than him, Socrates tells the jury that he sought to "investigate" this information. To do this, he spoke to a politician he believed was wiser than himself, but he quickly discovered the man wasn't, in truth, wise at all. "I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not," Socrates says. "I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not. So I withdrew and thought to myself: '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 know; so I am likely to be wiser than he is to this small extent."

When Socrates tests the Delphic oracle's message, he learns that the only truly valuable kind of "human wisdom" has to do with a person's willingness to acknowledge and accept his or her own ignorance. Indeed, the only reason Socrates is any wiser than his contemporaries is that he understands that he isn't wise at all. In turn, he sets forth a model of wisdom that depends upon humility—something the politician to whom he speaks apparently lacks.

Socrates tells the jury that he proceeded in this manner, methodically visiting the wisest people in Athens. Speaking with each of them, he considered the "meaning" of their "reputation[s]" as knowledgeable men, only to uncover their profound lack of wisdom. "In my investigation in the service of the god I found that those who had the highest reputation were nearly the most deficient, while those who were thought to be inferior were more knowledgeable," he says. After speaking with the politicians, Socrates visited the poets and found that they too have high opinions of their own knowledge and wisdom. "I saw that, because of their poetry, they thought themselves very wise men in other respects, which they were not," he says. Because of this, Socrates explains, he realized that he had the same "advantage over them as [he] had over the politicians."

Once again, Socrates suggests that only those humble enough to admit their own intellectual shortcomings are wise. Unfortunately, though, he has found that Athenian society celebrates the community's various experts so much that they become vain and overly self-assured. In turn, they are unable—or perhaps unwilling—to recognize the fact that expertise in one area doesn't necessarily lead to an all-encompassing sense of wisdom. Socrates, on the other hand, understands the depths of his own ignorance, and this makes him wiser than his fellow Athenians.

After visiting the poets, Socrates explains, he went to the craftsmen and found that they were more knowledgeable than him, since he knows very little about their work. However, he also saw that this knowledge led them to believe they were wise about other things about which—in truth—they knew nothing. As such, Socrates understood that he was wiser than them, since he at least recognizes his own lack of wisdom.

Yet again, Socrates emphasizes the importance of humility when it comes to assessing one's own knowledge. Rather than letting expertise in a certain field lead to a prevailing sense of vanity and confidence, he suggests, one should continue to critically examine the nature of his or her wisdom.

"As a result of this investigation, men of Athens, I acquired much unpopularity," Socrates says. Indeed, people began to slander him because they assumed he "possessed the wisdom that [he] proved [his] interlocutor did not have." Socrates continues, "What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, Socrates, 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.'"

By this point in his defense, Socrates has asserted not only that he is the wisest man in Athens, but that all human wisdom is "worthless." In turn, he intimates that only divine wisdom is valuable, thereby demonstrating his unfailing faith in the gods—an important thing to keep in mind as his apologia continues, since his piety is something he must prove to the jury.

Because he has dedicated himself to spreading the Delphic oracle's message about wisdom, Socrates lives in poverty. All the same, a group of young men have started following him around and have begun questioning people in the way that he has demonstrated, ultimately unveiling ignorance throughout Athens. In doing so, they have enraged many important men, who subsequently believe Socrates is "a pestilential fellow who corrupts the young." And yet, Socrates notes that none of these detractors can pinpoint how, exactly, he "corrupts" the young, and so they simply "mention those accusations that are available against all philosophers, about 'things in the sky and things below the earth,' about 'not believing in the gods' and 'making the worse the stronger argument.'" These are the accusations that Anytus, Lycon, and Meletus have leveled against him on behalf of the politicians, the orators, and the poets, respectively.

Socrates makes a noteworthy point when he says that his detractors' accusations are the same ones that people make against all philosophers. By saying this, he calls attention to just how uncomfortable people are around philosophers, since philosophers take it upon themselves to think critically about important matters. This, of course, often means challenging the prevailing structures of belief, which is why many Athenians are quick to accuse philosophers of corrupting the youth, since they are themselves unwilling to thoughtfully examining their worldviews. In this way, Socrates portrays his accusers as intellectually lazy and narrowminded.

Turning his attention to the accusations presented to the jury by Meletus, Socrates restates the deposition, saying, "Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things." First, he focuses on the claim that he has corrupted the young. To do this, he addresses Meletus directly, asking if he believes it is "of the greatest importance" that the young men of Athens "be as good as possible." When Meletus says yes, Socrates asks him to identify who, exactly, improves the youth. "The laws," Meletus answers, but Socrates urges him to identify a specific person, and Meletus momentarily finds himself at a loss.

Now that Socrates has defended himself against his unidentified "earlier accusers," he employs his characteristic dialogic technique—now known as the Socratic Method—to cross-examine Meletus, ultimately attempting to straightforwardly unveil the flaws in his accuser's rhetoric by asking simple questions. Interestingly enough, this is the same kind of conversational behavior that got him in trouble in the first place, since it is only through questioning important men that he has gained an unseemly reputation in Athens. Nevertheless, Socrates proceeds in his normal manner, thereby demonstrating to the jury that he believes wholeheartedly in finding the truth, regardless of whether or not people take issue with his methods.

Eventually, Meletus posits that the jurors "improve" the Athenian youth. "All of them, or some but not others?" Socrates asks, to which Meletus responds, "All of them." In turn, Socrates asks, "But what about the audience?" When Meletus agrees that the audience also "improves" the youth, Socrates asks about the council and assembly members, and Meletus says both these groups also benefit the youth. "All the Athenians, it seems, make the young into fine good men, except me, and I alone corrupt them. Is that what you mean?" Socrates asks. "That is most definitely what I mean," Meletus replies.

It's clear in this moment that Socrates is working his way toward a certain point, though it's not yet apparent what, exactly, he has in mind. And though he's employing a rhetorical technique, there's no denying that he's only asking Meletus to clarify what has already been said. As such, he encourages his accuser to thoughtfully examine his own assertions. In other words, Socrates simply wants Meletus to speak clearly, and this indicates his desire to access the truth. In turn, it's evident that Socrates isn't using persuasive trickery to "make the worse argument the stronger," but simply applying levelheaded intellectual pressure to Meletus's argument.

Going on, Socrates asks if this same principal applies to horses. "[Do] all men improve them and one individual corrupts them?" he asks. "Or is quite the contrary true, one individual is able to improve them, or very few, namely, the horse breeders, whereas the majority, if they have horses and use them, corrupt them?" When Meletus can't deny that this is true, Socrates reapplies the idea to humans, saying it "would be a very happy state of affairs if only one person corrupted [the] youth, while the others improved them."

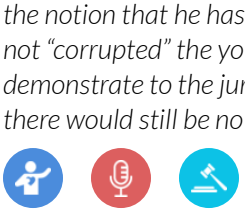
When Socrates says that horse breeders improve horses while the general population "corrupt[s]" them, he suggests that negative influences are abundant, whereas positive influences are unfortunately rare. If he himself were a bad influence on young Athenians, then, it would be highly unlikely that he'd be the only *person to "corrupt" them. And in any case, he clearly doesn't think he is a bad influence. Rather, he sees himself as equivalent to a horse breeder, in that he "improves" the Athenian youth in the same way that a breeder might "improve" a horse.*

Continuing his examination, Socrates asks Meletus if "wicked" people harm others while "good" people improve the people around them. "Certainly," Meletus says, and Socrates asks if anyone would "rather be harmed than benefited by his associates." "Of course not," Meletus says. "Do you accuse me here of corrupting the young and making them worse deliberately or unwillingly?" Socrates asks. "Deliberately," Meletus answers. In turn, Socrates reveals the flaw in Meletus's logic, since he has suggested that a person can be harmed by associating with wicked men. If Socrates were to "deliberately" corrupt the people around him, then, he would "run the risk of being harmed" himself.

Socrates uncovers Meletus's faulty reasoning by simply asking him questions. In turn, it becomes obvious that Meletus has not fully thought through the implications of his accusation that Socrates "deliberately" harms the people around him. After all, if Socrates purposely corrupted his fellow Athenians, then he would be harming himself, at least according to Meletus' assertion that a person can be negatively influenced by his "associates."

Socrates upholds that if he is indeed spreading wickedness throughout Athens without meaning to, he shouldn't be punished, but rather taught how to stop acting badly. "You, however, have avoided my company and were unwilling to instruct me," Socrates says to Meletus, pointing out that "the law requires one to bring [to court] those who are in need of punishment, not of instruction."

In this moment, Socrates suggests that Meletus is the one who has failed to uphold his moral responsibility, which is to "instruct" those who unwittingly spread wickedness throughout Athens. By making this implication, Socrates ultimately invites the jurors to consider the notion that he has been mistreated. Of course, he knows he has not "corrupted" the youth, but he proceeds as if he has in order to demonstrate to the jury that even if Meletus' accusations were true, there would still be no reason to treat this as a legal matter.



Focusing on the claim that he doesn't believe in the gods, Socrates asks if Meletus thinks he (Socrates) is an atheist, or someone who believes in "other" gods. Meletus clarifies that he thinks Socrates doesn't believe in gods at all. In response, Socrates says, "Does any man, Meletus, believe in human activities who does not believe in humans?" Similarly, he asks if any man "who does not believe in horses" can believe in "horseman's activities," or if a person who believes in "flute-playing activities" can deny the existence of "flute-players." Working his way to his main point, he says, "Does any man believe in spiritual activities who does not believe in spirts?" and Meletus says, "No one." Socrates then reminds Meletus that he has said in his deposition that Socrates believes in "spiritual things." This, Socrates upholds, means he must also believe in spirits.

Once more, Socrates encourages Meletus to clarify his accusations. Since Meletus admits that no one can believe in "spiritual activities who does not believe in spirits," it follows that Socrates must believe in spirits. By establishing this point, Socrates methodically makes his way toward a defense of his religious faith and overall piety.

"Do we not believe spirits to be either gods or the children of gods?" Socrates asks. "Of course," Meletus replies. In keeping with this, Socrates points out that Meletus has again contradicted himself. After all, if spirits are "gods or the children of gods"—and if Socrates believes in "spiritual things"—then he must surely also believe in the gods. Even if he only believed in "the children of gods," this would still require him to believe in the gods themselves. Having unearthed Meletus's contradiction, Socrates says, "This is what I mean when I say you speak in riddles and in jest, as you state that I do not believe in gods and then again that I do, since I do believe in spirits."

It's worth noting Socrates's use of the word "we" when he says, "Do we not believe spirits to be either gods or the children of gods?" By using this plural pronoun, Socrates aligns himself with his fellow Athenians, suggesting that he shares their beliefs. What's more, he takes a rather scolding tone, as if Meletus is the one deviating from the religious beliefs that prevail throughout Athens. Furthermore, by revealing Meletus's contradictory argument, Socrates frames his chief accuser as incompetent and intellectually lazy and, thus, untrustworthy.

Addressing the jury, Socrates posits that he has sufficiently defended himself against Meletus's charges, though he's cognizant that his "undoing" will not be the result of Meletus or Anytus, but of the "slander" that has led to his unfavorable reputation. Regarding this, Socrates says, "Someone might say: 'Are you not ashamed, Socrates, to have followed the kind of occupation that has led to your being now in danger of death?" This question, he upholds, is easy to answer, for he believes that "a man who is any good at all" should never take "the risk of life or death" into account. "He should look to this only in his actions, whether he is acting like a good or a bad man," he says.

At this point in his defense, Socrates shows the jury the strength of his moral integrity, something to which he remains faithful regardless of what other people think. As a result, he remains unbothered by the possibility that he might receive a death penalty, for he believes that a person should only ask himself "whether he is acting like a good or a bad man." Needless to say, Socrates is confident that he's acting like a good man, and though this perhaps doesn't align with what people like Meletus and Anytus think, he refuses to feel "ashamed" for the way he has chosen to comport himself.

Socrates insists that "wherever a man has taken a position that he believes to be best, or has been placed by his commander, there he must [...] remain and face danger, without a thought for death or anything else." This is because he believes that fearing death is the same thing as thinking oneself wise when one is not, since "no one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man." And since it is a "blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know," Socrates upholds that people should never assume death is a bad thing.

Socrates's ideas about mortality are directly related to his convictions about wisdom. Simply put, he never wants to make any assumptions about matters about which he knows nothing. This, of course, is precisely why the Delphic oracle has dubbed him the wisest man in Athens—he does not presume to know things he does not know. In addition, this perspective also relates to Socrates's dedication to finding the truth, since his reluctance to assume death is bad illustrates his staunch unwillingness to adopt uninformed or intellectually lazy worldviews.

In keeping with the fact that he doesn't fear death, Socrates tells the jury he will not change his behavior if he is acquitted, even if he's set free on the condition that he stop encouraging Athenians to interrogate their beliefs. Indeed, if he were acquitted under these circumstances, he would say, "Men of Athens, I am grateful and I am your friend, but I will obey the god rather than you, and as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practice philosophy [...]."

Once again, Socrates impresses upon the jurors the strength of his own moral integrity. Even though this apologia is a chance to placate his accusers and possibly avoid the death penalty, he refuses to "cease" practicing philosophy, for he believes that in doing so he is serving "the god" (Apollo). By saying this, he not only expresses a sense of ethical responsibility, but also refutes the accusation that he is impious, since he sees his philosophical practice as a religious endeavor.

Socrates reiterates that he isn't afraid of death, saying that Meletus can't possibly harm him. In fact, he believes Meletus only risks harming *himself* by "attempting to have a man executed unjustly." In keeping with this, Socrates suggests that he isn't delivering this defense for his own sake, but for the sake of the jury, since he wants to "prevent" them from "wrongdoing." Indeed, he doesn't want the jurors to condemn him and thereby "mistreat the god's gift" that he represents. "I was attached to this city by the god—though it seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of **gadfly**," Socrates says.

Comparing himself to a "gadfly" that "stir[s]" a horse, Socrates acknowledges the fact that many of his fellow Athenians see him as nothing more than a nuisance. However, he also suggests that he is a necessary *nuisance, since he takes it upon himself to improve those around him. Unfortunately, his efforts are sometimes difficult to appreciate, since he encourages people to recognize their own shortcomings. Nonetheless, he upholds, having someone like him is a "gift" from "the god," and because he is so pious, he refuses to stop treating his fellow citizens in this manner.*

Socrates tells the jury that Athens will not easily find another man willing to encourage people (against their will) to improve. What's more, he admits that it might seem odd that he has never accepted a public position, but this is because he has a "divine or spiritual sign" that has always "prevented" him from "taking part in public affairs." This sign, he explains, keeps him from doing that which he should not do. In keeping with this, he explains that he would have "died long ago" if he had become a politician, since "a man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time."

When Socrates says that "a man who really fights for justice must lead a private" life, he hints at the fact that the current political climate in Athens is unfit for morally upstanding individuals. If someone like him—with a strong moral compass and an unyielding sense of honor—cannot "survive" as a public official, then this must mean that Athens is failing to uphold the democratic values of justice and morality.

Socrates tells a story about the end of the Peloponnesian War, when Spartans won control of Athens and installed an oligarchy run by the Thirty Tyrants. "When the oligarchy was established," he says, "the Thirty summoned me to the hall, along with four others, and ordered us to bring Leon from Salamis, that he might be executed." Rather than obeying, though, Socrates simply went home while the other four Athenians captured Leon. He did this, he explains, because his primary "concern is not to do anything unjust or impious." He knows he would have been executed for this if the oligarchy hadn't fallen shortly after the event took place.

During the Peloponnesian War—which took place between 431 and 404 BC—the Delian League (from Athens) fought against the Peloponnesian League (from Sparta). Eventually, the Spartans overtook Athens and installed an oppressive oligarchy known as the Thirty Tyrants. Even under the cruel and unyielding governance of the Thirty, Socrates refused to betray his ethical convictions. By telling this story, Socrates shows the jury how thoroughly committed he is to maintaining his moral integrity.

Socrates says that if the jurors believe he has harmed or "corrupted" them, they should stand and make their feelings known. When no one rises, Socrates says this is because he hasn't harmed anyone. He also points out that there are many men listening who know him well and would not hesitate to condemn him if he had treated them badly. Indeed, he sees Crito and Crito's son Critobulus in attendance, as well as Apollodorus and Plato, all of whom are close acquaintances who could speak accurately about his character. He then addresses the fact that he is not crying and pleading with the jury, as many people do when they are brought to court. This, he explains, is because he doesn't think it's "right" to do such things, believing that the men who act this way "bring shame upon the city."

Many scholars and readers of Plato believe Socrates disapproved of democracy (this is largely based on the opinions he expresses in Plato's The Republic). However, it's worth considering this moment, in which Socrates refuses to manipulate the jury by crying and pleading for their forgiveness. On the one hand, this refusal indicates that he thinks democracy is a system that is subject to emotional manipulation and, as such, is inherently flawed. On the other hand, his assertion that people who manipulate the jury "bring shame upon the city" suggests that he believes acting this way disrespects the values for which Athens stands. This, it seems, indicates a certain reverence for what Athenian democracy could be, *though it's obvious Socrates doesn't think his contemporaries are properly enforcing or living up to this standard. Regardless, it's clear that Socrates is critical of democracy—whether or not this means he completely disapproves of it as an effective mode of governance remains unclear (at least in this text).*

Socrates says he thinks it's wrong to "supplicate the jury" with tears and hysterics. "It is not the purpose of a juryman's office to give justice as a favor to whoever seems good to him, but to judge according to law," he says. Furthermore, he states that people like him shouldn't behave this way in court because doing so might put the jurors in the "habit" of perjury. "This is irreverent conduct for either of us," he says. Refusing to do anything other than speak truthfully, then, Socrates expresses his satisfaction with the way he has defended himself, at which point he concludes his speech by saying, "I leave it to you and the god to judge me in the way that will be best for me and for you."

Again, scholars debate whether or not Socrates believed in democracy as an effective mode of governance. And though nothing in Apology *provides a definitive answer regarding this debate, it's worth noting that his unwillingness to let the jurors perjure themselves in court suggests that he wants to help his fellow Athenians operate as a just and honest governing body. Furthermore, his willingness to let himself be judged "in the way that will be best" for everyone involved indicates that—despite his misgivings—he respects the current system enough to abide by it.*

After Socrates finishes his initial defense, the jury pronounces him guilty, and Meletus "asks for the penalty of death." At this point, Socrates is given a chance to argue in favor of whatever penalty he thinks is fairest. He begins by saying that he isn't angry at the jury for finding him guilty, adding that he's impressed by how close the vote was. Turning his attention to Meletus' request that he be put to death, he says, "So be it. What counter-assessment should I propose to you, men of Athens? Clearly it should be a penalty I deserve, and what do I deserve to suffer or to pay because I have deliberately not led a quiet life but have neglected what occupies most people: wealth, household affairs, the position of general or public orator or the other offices, the political clubs and factions that exist in the city?"

When Socrates considers what penalty he should receive, he delivers a tongue-in-cheek summary of what he has done to "deserve" punishment, reminding the jury that he has "neglected" to live "a quiet life" full of "wealth" and cushy governmental positions. In turn, he subtly suggests once more that he is being prosecuted simply because he has lived a life that is "out of the common." Indeed, Meletus and his cronies are made uncomfortable by Socrates' unconventional ways of thinking and behaving, which is why they have sought to destroy him.

Reminding the jury that he has tried hard to help Athenians improve themselves, Socrates suggests that what he *really* "deserve[s]" is not a penalty, but a reward. As such, he glibly says he should be allowed to eat in the Prytaneum (a great hall where Olympian victors often dined). "Since I am convinced that I wrong no one, I am not likely to wrong myself, to say that I deserve some evil and to make some such assessment against myself," Socrates adds.

This is perhaps the first and only time in his defense that Socrates actually advocates for himself, though he is of course being facetious, since he knows the jury will not reward him. And yet, he's also being serious when he says he won't purposefully "wrong" himself, as this would go against his views. Even in jest, then, Socrates demonstrates the strength of his moral integrity.

Not wanting to ask for imprisonment because he knows it to be "evil," Socrates considers the penalty of exile. This prospect, he explains, does not suit him either, since he can reasonably assume he will be treated the same anywhere he goes. Indeed, he upholds that if the Athenians cannot "endure" his philosophical and moral examinations, then no one else will tolerate him, either. And though one might think he could simply leave Athens and lead a quiet life, he reminds the jury that "the greatest good for a man [is] to discuss virtue every day." As such, he would not remain quiet if he were to leave Athens, "for the unexamined life is not worth living."

Once again, Socrates demonstrates that he doesn't fear death. After all, it would be rather easy, it seems, for him to avoid the death penalty by suggesting that he be banished from Athens. However, he knows he'll never stop upholding and enforcing his values, and so he makes his peace with the idea of dying for these values, upholding that "the unexamined life is not worth living."

Unwilling to accept imprisonment or exile as punishments, Socrates considers the idea of a fine, saying he would "assess the penalty at the amount [he] could pay" (since he doesn't care about money), but he is poor and would only be able to afford "one mina of silver." However, he proceeds by saying that Plato, Crito, Critobulus, and Apollodorus have urged him to set the penalty at thirty minas, since they will "stand surety for the money." "Well then," he concludes, "that is my assessment, and they will be sufficient guarantee of payment."

It's worth mentioning here that this is the second time Socrates has mentioned Plato by name. In this case, he makes it clear that Plato is among his supporters who are willing to financially vouch for him. Despite the fact that Socrates sets this penalty, though, it's clear he doesn't truly see it as a punishment, since he isn't—and has never been—concerned with money. Indeed, he has already gone out of his way to establish this while proving to the jury that he isn't a Sophist.

Once again, the jury votes, this time sentencing Socrates to death, at which point Socrates is allowed to deliver his final remarks. "It is for the sake of a short time, men of Athens, that you will acquire the reputation and the guilt, in the eyes of those who want to denigrate the city, of having killed Socrates, a wise man, for they who want to revile you will say that I am wise even if I am not," he says. Still, he doesn't regret how he has defended himself. "I was convicted because I lacked not words but boldness and shamelessness and the willingness to say to you what you would most gladly have heard from me, lamentations and tears and my saying and doing many things that I say are unworthy of me but that you are accustomed to hear from others," he says.

Once again, Socrates suggests that trying to manipulate the jury by acting hysterically is shameful and disrespectful of the entire judicial process. This is why he stands by the manner in which he has delivered his defense. Indeed, he is so committed to presenting the truth that he refuses to "supplicate" his detractors, who he insists will soon feel "guilt[y]" for needlessly killing one of their fellow citizens.

Socrates tells the jurors who voted for his acquittal that he would be happy to talk to them about what has just happened. "A surprising thing has happened to me, jurymen—you I would rightly call jurymen," he says, going on to explain that throughout his life his "familiar prophetic power" or "spiritual manifestation" often stopped him from doing things. However, it did not hold him back from coming to the courthouse or speaking freely before the jury today. This, he upholds, means what he has done is "right."

Although Socrates has been found guilty of—among other things—impiety, it's clear that he is strongly devoted to spirituality and, thus, the gods. This is made evident by the fact that he references the "spiritual' and "prophetic power" that guides him, ultimately holding it up as proof that he has done the right thing by allowing himself to be sentenced to death.

Socrates once again considers the nature of death, saying it's either a total lack of perception or "a change and a relocating for the soul from here to another place." In either case, Socrates says, he will be content. After all, he doesn't fear nothingness, and he'd be happy to pass the time in the afterlife "testing and examining people there" in the same way he has done in Athens. Going on, he states that he isn't angry at the people who sentenced him or at his accusers. The only thing he asks is that his fellow Athenians "reproach" his sons if they ever "care for money or anything else more than they care for virtue." Having said this, he states that the hour of his death has arrived. "I go to die, you go to live," he says. "Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god."

Again, Socrates appears unfazed by the fact that he is going to be put to death. This is unsurprising, considering that he doesn't think death—an unknown—is something a person should consider when contemplating whether or not to do the right thing. In keeping with this, his only concern is that his fellow Athenians make sure his sons embody this kind of virtue. What's more, his parting words not only reiterate the fact that death is an unknown, but also hint at his concern that the jurors—who have acted immorally—have ultimately harmed themselves *by sentencing him to death.*

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