

PLATO'S APOLOGY: DEFENSE OF SOCRATES

Plato's *Defense of Socrates* is his account of the trial of Socrates for crimes of corrupting the youth of Athens and failing to believe in the gods. Included here is a heavily excerpted piece of the first portion, where Socrates (defending himself) argues that he should not be convicted of these crimes. I have excluded the first argument, where Socrates basically states that he was accused because he made powerful men in Athens look like fools through his powerful use of rhetoric and inability to ignore a lie.

[Excerpted]

[...] Let us examine, from the beginning, the charge that has given rise to the slander against me - which was just what Meletus¹ relied upon when he drew up this indictment.² [...]

[...] "Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young, and of failing to acknowledge the gods acknowledged by the city, but introducing new spiritual beings instead."

Such is the charge: let us examine each item within it.

Meletus says, then, that I am guilty of corrupting the young. Well I reply, fellow Athenians, that Meletus I guilty of trifling in a serious matter, in that he brings people to trial on frivolous grounds, and professes grave concern about matter for which he has never cared at all. I shall now try to prove to you that this is so.

[...] [Meletus,] will you please tell the judges who influences [young people] for the better - because you must obviously know, seeing that you care? Having discovered me, as you allege, to be the one who is corrupting them, you bring me before the judges here and accuse me. So speak up, and tell the court who has an improving influence.

You see, Meletus, you remain silent, and have no answer. Yet doesn't that strike you as shameful, and as proof in itself of exactly what I say - that you have never cared about these matters at all? Come then, good fellow, tell us who influences them for the better.

- The laws.

Yes, but that is not what I'm asking, excellent fellow. I mean, which *person*, who already knows the laws to begin with?

- These gentlemen, the judges, Socrates.

What are you saying, Meletus? Can these people educate the young, and do they have an improving influence?

- Most certainly.

All of them, or some but not others?

- All of them.

¹ Meletus was one of the prosecutors at Socrates' trial.

² Indictment: Formal charge or accusation of a serious crime.

My goodness, what welcome news, and what a generous supply of benefactors you speak of! And how about the audience here in court? Do they too have an improving influence, or not?

- Yes, they do too.

And how about the members of the Council?³

- Yes, the Councilors too.

But in that case, how about people in the Assembly, its individual members, Meletus? They won't be corrupting their youngsters, will they? Won't they all be good influences as well?

- Yes, they will too.

So every person in Athens, it would appear, has an excellent influence on them except for me, whereas I alone am corrupting them. Is that what you're saying?

- That is emphatically what I'm saying.

[Socrates then argues that it only takes a few people to have a positive influence on people and combat the bad influence of many.] I dare say our young people are extremely lucky if only one person is corrupting them, while everyone else is doing them good.

All right Meletus. Enough has been said to prove that you were never concerned about the young. You betray your irresponsibility plainly, because you have not cared at all about the charges on which you bring me before this court.

Furthermore, Meletus, tell us, in God's name, whether it is better to live among good fellow citizens or bad ones. Come sir, answer: I am not asking a hard question. Bad people have a harmful impact upon their closest companions at any given time, don't they, whereas good people have a good one?

- Yes.

Well, is there anyone who wants to be harmed by his companions rather than benefited? - Be a good fellow and keep on answering as the law requires you to. Is there anyone who wants to be harmed?

- Of course not.

Now tell me this. In bringing me here, do you claim that I am corrupting and depraving the young intentionally or unintentionally?

- Intentionally, so I maintain.

Really, Meletus? Are you so much smarter at your age than I at mine as to realize that the bad have a harmful impact upon their closest companions at any given time, whereas the good have a beneficial effect? Am I, by contrast, so far gone in my stupidity as not to realize that if I make one of my companions vicious, I risk incurring harm at his hands? And am I, therefore, as you allege, doing so much damage intentionally?

³ The Athenian Council: the governing body of Athens, consisting of 500 citizens who served for a year at a time.

That I cannot accept from you, Meletus, and neither could anyone else, I imagine. Either I am not corrupting them - or if I am, I am doing so unintentionally; so either way your charge is false. But if I am corrupting them unintentionally, the law does not require me to be brought to court for such mistakes, but rather to be taken aside for private instruction and admonition - since I shall obviously stop doing unintentional damage if I learn better. But you avoided association with me and were unwilling to instruct me. Instead you bring me to court, where the law requires you to bring people who need punishment rather than enlightenment. Very well, fellow Athenians. That part of my case is now proven: Meletus never cared about these matters either a lot or a little.

[Socrates continues, and defends himself against a charge of not believing in the gods.]

But enough, fellow Athenians. It needs no long defense, I think, to show that I am not guilty of the charges in Meletus' indictment; the foregoing will suffice. You may be sure, though, that what I was saying earlier is true: I have earned great hostility among many people. And that is what will convict me, if I am convicted: not Meletus or Anytus,⁴ but the slander and malice of the crowd. They have certainly convicted many other good men as well, and I imagine they will do so again; there is no risk of their stopping with me.

Now someone may perhaps say: 'Well then, are you not ashamed, Socrates, to have pursued a way of life which has now put you at risk of death?'⁵

But it may be fair for me to answer him as follows: 'You are sadly mistaken, fellow, If you suppose that a man with even a grain of self-respect should reckon up the risks of living or dying, rather than simply consider whenever he does something, whether his actions are just or unjust, the deeds of a good man or a bad one. By your principles, presumably, all those demigods who died in the plain of Troy⁶ were inferior creatures - yes, even the son of Thetis,⁷ who showed so much scorn for danger, when the alternative was to endure dishonor. Thus, when he was eager to slay Hector, his mother, goddess that she was, spoke to him - something like this, I fancy:

My child, if thou does avenge the murder of thy friend Patroclus,
And dost slay Hector, then straightway [so runs the poem]
Shalt thou die thyself, since doom is prepared for thee
Next after Hector's.

But though he heard that, he made light of death and danger, since he feared far more to live as a base man, and to fail to avenge his dear ones. The poem goes on:

Then straightway let me die, once I have given the wrongdoer
His desserts, lest I remain here by the beak-prowed ships,
An object of derision, and a burden upon the earth.⁸

Can you suppose that he gave any thought to death or danger?

⁴ Another prosecutor

⁵ He is asking if he should be ashamed for living in a way that earned him such powerful enemies.

⁶ A reference to Homer's *Iliad*.

⁷ Achilles, son of Thetis (a goddess)

⁸ Achilles kills Hector as revenge for the death of his best friend, Patroclus. Achilles is warned that killing Hector will lead to his own death, but he does it anyway. (Hubris! Tragic downfall! English class stuff!)

You see, here is the truth of the matter, fellow Athenians. Whenever a man has taken up a position because he considers it best, or has been posted there by his commander, that is where I believe he should remain, steadfast in danger, taking no account at all of death or of anything else rather than dishonor. I would therefore have been acting absurdly, fellow Athenians, if when assigned to a post at Potidaea, Amphipolis, or Delium by the superiors you had elected to command me, I remained where I was posted on those occasions at the risk of death, if ever any man did; whereas now that the god assigns me, as I become completely convinced, to the duty of leading the philosophical life by examining myself and others, I desert that post from fear of death or anything else. Yes, that would be unthinkable; and then I truly should deserve to be brought to court for failing to acknowledge the gods' existence, in that I was disobedient to the oracle, was afraid of death, and thought I was wise when I was not.

[...] Suppose, therefore, that you pay no heed to Anytus, but are prepared to let me go. He said that I need never have been brought to court in the first place; but that once I had been, your only option was to put me to death. He declared before you that, if I got away from you this time, your sons would all be utterly corrupted by practicing Socrates' teachings. Suppose, in the face of that, you were to say to me:

'Socrates, we will not listen to Anytus this time. We are prepared to let you go - but only on this condition: you are to pursue that quest of yours and practice philosophy no longer; and if you are caught doing it anymore, you shall be put to death.'

Well, as I just said, if you were prepared to let me go on those terms, I should reply to you as follows:

'I have the greatest fondness and affection for you, fellow Athenians, but I will obey my god⁹ rather than you; and so long as I draw breath and am able, I shall never give up practicing philosophy, or exhorting and showing the way to any of you whom I ever encounter, by giving my usual sort of message. "Excellent friend," I shall say; "You are an Athenian. Your city is the most important and renowned for its wisdom and power; so are you not ashamed that, while you take care to acquire as much wealth as possible, with honor and glory as well, yet you take no care or thought for understanding or truth, or for the best possible state of your soul?"

'And should any of you dispute that, and claim that he does take such care, I will not let him go straight away nor leave him, but I will question and examine and put him to the test; and if I do not think he has acquired goodness, though he says he has, I shall say, "Shame on you, for setting the lowest value upon the most precious things, and for rating inferior things more highly!" That I shall do for anyone I encounter, young or old, alien or fellow citizen; but all the more for the latter, since your kinship with me is closer.'

Those are my orders from my god, I do assure you. Indeed, I believe that no greater good has ever befallen you in our city than my service to my god; because all I do is to go about persuading you, young and old alike, not to care for your bodies or for your wealth so intensely as for the greatest possible well-being of your souls. 'It is not wealth', I tell you, 'that produces goodness; rather, it is from goodness that wealth, and all other benefits for human beings, accrue to them in their private and public life.'

⁹ Socrates claims earlier in the text that the Oracle declared him the wisest of all men, and he discovered this to be because he recognized the limits of his own wisdom. He therefore considers it a godly duty to show other men the limits of their own wisdom.

If, in fact, I am corrupting the young by those assertions, you may call them harmful. But if anyone claims that I say anything different, he is talking nonsense. In the face of that, I should like to say: 'Fellow Athenians, you may listen to Anytus or not, as you please; and you may let me go or not, as you please, because there is no chance of my acting otherwise, even if I have to die many times over -'

Stop protesting, fellow Athenians! Please abide by my request that you not protest against what I say, but hear me out; in fact, it will be in your interest, so I believe, to do so. You see, I am going to say some further things to you which may make you shout out - although I beg you not to.

You may be assured that if you put to death the sort of man I just said I was, you will not harm me any more than you harm yourselves. Meletus or Anytus would not harm me at all; nor, in fact, could they do so, since I believe it is out of the question for a better man to be harmed by his inferior. The latter may, of course, inflict death or banishment or disenfranchisement; and my accuser here, along with others no doubt, believes those to be great evils. But I do not. Rather, I believe it a far greater evil to try to kill a man unjustly, as he does now. [...]¹⁰

¹⁰ Socrates was convicted of his crimes by the Council, sentenced to death, and poisoned with hemlock, in one of the most famous deaths in history.