Historical Background to Plato’s Apology of Socrates

Despite having written nothing, few thinkers have left a more significant and lasting mark on the Western intellectual tradition than Socrates. He is an enduring source of admiration and interest for philosophers and non-philosophers alike, revered not only for his thought, but also for the way he lived and died. Socrates was the first philosopher in the Western tradition to think critically about how people should live and the good life. His insistence on self-examination and rational argument as the path to wisdom and truth remains the philosophical ideal. “All philosophers,” the great Roman statesman and orator Cicero wrote, “think of themselves, and want others to think of them, as followers of Socrates.”

Our knowledge of Socrates’ life and thought comes from what his contemporaries wrote about him. Chief among these sources is Plato, a brilliant philosopher in his own right, who was also one of Socrates’ most devoted students. Most of Plato’s writings are dialogues in which Socrates is the main character. Socratic dialogues were a common literary form following Socrates’ death; apparently, many of his admirers wrote such works. Besides the dialogues of Plato, the only surviving sources of significant, first-hand information about Socrates are the writings of Xenophon, a historian and military leader, and the satirical plays of Aristophanes, especially The Clouds.¹

The Apology is Plato’s account of what Socrates said at his trial in Athens, Greece in 399 B.C.E. (Despite the title, at no time does Socrates in our sense “apologize” or admit wrongdoing. Apologia in Greek means literally “a speech made in defense.”) Plato has surely not provided us with a journalistic transcription of what Socrates said, although it is fair to assume that Plato is faithful to the style and arguments Socrates actually used on this occasion. Many in Plato’s intended audience would have heard Socrates’ defense for themselves. Because the Apology describes a historical event, a proper appreciation of Socrates’ speech requires some familiarity with the relevant social, legal and political context in which his trial took place. The sections below are intended to supply some of the background without which first-time readers are likely to find various aspects of the Apology and other Socratic dialogues puzzling.

1. Socrates (469 – 399 B.C.E.)

By all accounts, Socrates was an unusual man. Whereas most Athenians valued fame, honors, and wealth, none of these things interested him. He was famously poor and spent most of his time in public places engaging people from all walks of life in philosophical conversation. Although he ably performed the duties expected of an Athenian citizen, including military and political service, Socrates did not seek political power or honor. He was ugly, with bulging, wide-set eyes, an upturned nose with flaring

¹ English translations of many of Xenophon’s writings and Aristophanes’ plays are readily available on the web, such as at the Project Gutenberg site, http://www.gutenberg.org/.
nostrils, and large lips. He walked with an arrogant-looking swagger or waddle, carrying a stick, and had a habit of rolling his eyes. Apparently, he could drink large quantities of alcohol without becoming intoxicated and was indifferent to extremes of heat and cold, as was shown by his penchant for walking barefoot, even in the dead of winter. Socrates rarely changed clothes or bathed and let his hair grow long, characteristics that Athenians would have associated with their arch-enemies, the Spartans. He had three sons by his wife, Xanthippe, all of whom would have been fairly young when he was executed at the age of 70.

Socrates was also well-known for his unorthodox religious beliefs. He claimed that his childhood friend, Chairephon, once asked the priestess at Delphi if anyone was wiser than Socrates. (Delphi, 115 miles northwest of Athens, was the location of the most important shrine to Apollo, the son of Zeus and the Greek god of light, intelligence, and the arts. In the temple, a priestess, the “Pythian,” was believed to transmit Apollo’s wisdom to humans.) The reply was that “no one is wiser.” (Ap. 21a6) The priestess’ answers were notoriously mysterious and ambiguous, and so Socrates sought to clarify the oracle. He came to believe that Apollo had given him a divine mission to seek out those with wisdom and to undo the pretensions of those who falsely believed that they had it. (Ap. 23b3 – 7) Socrates also claimed to have been guided since his youth by a daimonion, a sort of divine “voice” or “sign.” His reference to a “divine sign from the god” (Ap. 31c7) suggests that he thought his daimonion transmitted to him guidance from Apollo. Apollo was an important God to the Athenians, but presumably few of them believed themselves to be privileged by Apollo in the way Socrates claimed to have been.

What we know as the “Socratic method” is derived from Socrates’ characteristic mode of conversation, a kind of cross-examination known as the elenchus (literally, “refutation”). These discussions seem to have followed a typical pattern. After first professing his own ignorance, Socrates would begin by inviting someone to help set him straight. This usually involved asking his conversation partner to explain “What is X?,” where X was an important ethical concept, such as virtue, justice, love, courage or piety. Socrates would continue to ask questions, exploring the implications of his interlocutor’s responses. Invariably, the person Socrates questioned would end up humbled, tripped up in a self-contradiction.

Though these elenctic examinations no doubt angered many Athenians, Socrates’ aim was not to embarrass or humiliate others. His goal was to improve on an initial, incomplete definition in order to arrive at a more adequate and complete understanding of the subject. (In many of Plato’s early Socratic dialogues, however, the elenchus ends without a satisfying result.) Accordingly, Socrates sometimes refers himself as a kind of “midwife,” because he thought the elenchus could give “birth” to the truth. His underlying aim was to get people to care for virtue and truth more than anything else. He believed that until one has a firm grasp of the truth about the good life, one cannot live

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2 Delphic oracles play an important role in many ancient Greek legends and stories. The oracle correctly foretold, for example, that Oedipus would kill his father, King Laius, and marry his mother Jocasta. The historian Herodotus reports that King Croesus of Lydia asked the oracle if he should invade Persia. The priestess’ response was that if he did, a mighty empire would be destroyed. Croesus invaded, expecting victory, but it was his own kingdom that was destroyed as a result.

3 In Greek mythology, daimonia were thought to be divine beings, perhaps children of the gods, but inferior to the gods themselves. However, daimonia seem to have played at best a marginal role in Athenian religious beliefs.
well, and that one cannot have a firm grasp of the truth without subjecting one’s beliefs to critical scrutiny. Hence his famous remark at *Apology* 38a5-6 that, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” A thorough and honest examination of how one should live is necessary to a worthwhile human existence. Many of Socrates’ contemporaries, perhaps not surprisingly, seem not to have appreciated the help he tried to offer them.

2. Plato (429 - 347 B.C.E.)

Originally named Aristocles, Plato came from a wealthy and politically influential Athenian family. He acquired the nickname “Plato” early in life, perhaps from his wrestling coach. (*Platos* in Greek means width or breadth; some conjecture that the nickname was inspired by his broad shoulders.) Also in his youth, Plato became a loyal follower of Socrates and for a time was presumably the kind of young man Socrates refers to at *Ap.* 23c1 – 4, one of those who enjoyed watching Socrates’ philosophizing and imitated him. Though he was expected to pursue a political career, Plato became disillusioned with Athenian politics, likely due at least in part to the harsh and unjust treatment his mentor ultimately received. Instead, he devoted himself to philosophy and teaching. He founded the Academy in around 385 B.C.E., a school that lasted through various changes until 527 C.E. (Our word “academic” is derived from this institution.) Today he is regarded as one of the greatest Western philosophers and literary geniuses of all time. His intellectual influence is so great, his thought is so rich and suggestive, that in virtually every age from his time to the present day significant philosophers and schools of thought can be identified as Platonistic. Only Aristotle (his student) and Kant approach Plato in terms of their originality, breadth of thought, and impact on subsequent thinkers.

By making Socrates the main character in most of his dialogues, Plato aimed both to keep Socrates’ philosophy alive and to contribute to ongoing debates in his own time about the meaning of Socrates’ life and teaching. As a result, it is sometimes difficult to disentangle the historical Socrates from Plato’s literary reconstruction of him. Many scholars, however, think that the *Apology* and other early Platonic dialogues (such as the *Euthyphro* and the *Crito*) represent the historical Socrates more accurately than Plato’s later writings, where the character Socrates gradually but increasingly becomes a mouthpiece for Plato’s own views.

3. Historical Context – Athens in 399 B.C.E.

In Socrates’ youth, the city-state of Athens was prosperous and democratic with a thriving culture and intellectual freedom. This “Golden Age” ended when the long and difficult Peloponnesian War with Sparta began in 431 B.C.E.. A plague the following year killed around a quarter of Athens’ estimated 250,000 inhabitants. During the war, Socrates served as a footsoldier in at least three battles, including one at Potidaea, where he distinguished himself by saving Alcibiades’ life. Finally, in 404 B.C.E. the Spartans conquered Athens. Hostile to democracy as they were, the Spartans demanded that Athens’ democratic Assembly be replaced by a council composed of three members from each of Athens’ ten tribes. These “Thirty Tyrants,” as they came to be known, were ruthless. They seized the property of wealthy Athenians and killed some 1,500 political
opponents to consolidate their hold on power. They were soon deposed by a “Board of Ten,” elected one per tribe, and a wave of democratic reforms began. These reforms included a thorough revision of Athens’ legal code, completed in 401/400 B.C.E., which included amnesty for legal offenses committed before the reforms.

Even though Socrates could not legally have been prosecuted in 399 B.C. for offenses committed years before, many have speculated that the formal charges brought against him were a pretext used to avenge earlier deeds. Although Socrates refused an order from the Thirty to assist them in executing Leon from Salamis (Ap. 32c3 – 6), some Athenians may have associated Socrates with their murderous reign. Critias, one of the most brutal of the Thirty, was in his youth influenced by Socrates, although he later turned against him. Also Alcibiades, who for a time was one of Athens’ most revered generals and another admirer of Socrates, persuaded the Assembly in 415 B.C.E. that Athens should attack Sicily. The Sicilian campaign proved to be a costly and humiliating Athenian failure. Alcibiades later defected to Sparta and aided its eventual victory over Athens. It is thus tempting to suspect that Socrates might have been an appealing target for Athenian democrats looking for a scapegoat.

4. The Athenian Legal System

In the American legal system, criminal charges are brought against the accused by a prosecutor acting in the name of the state. In the Athenian system, private citizens brought cases against other private citizens. To begin a proceeding, one citizen summoned another before the magistrate (the king-archon). In Socrates’ case, he was summoned by Meletus. (Socrates is in on his way to this initial meeting when the conversation described in Plato’s Euthyphro takes place.) After hearing both the charges and the defense, the archon determined whether an initial hearing should be held, and, should the charges prove to have merit, a trial. The public document containing Meletus’ charges against Socrates survived until at least the second century C.E., but has since been lost.

Trials lasted for one full day. The jurors were citizen volunteers chosen by lot and paid for their service. In order to safeguard against jury tampering and bribery, the juries were large. Socrates’ case was heard by about 500 jurors. In the first phase of the trial, the prosecution made its case followed by the defense. Socrates’ defense likely lasted about three hours. Neither side was represented by lawyers, but defendants were allowed to cross-examine their accusers directly. Many prosecutors and defendants hired rhetoricians to compose speeches for them. Speeches that flattered the jurors, apparently, were common. Following the presentation of each side, jurors then cast a ballot for either innocence or guilt. Since the juries were large, deliberation was nonexistent. The jurors simply decided for themselves whether the defendant was innocent based on their understanding of the law and without instruction from a judge. As a result, the legal merits of a case often became secondary to the persuasive skills of the speakers. If the defendant was found guilty, the trial moved to a second, sentencing stage. Each side made suggestions as to the appropriate punishment and the jurors chose between the two suggestions, again by casting ballots.

Meletus, Lycon and Anytus were Socrates’ prosecutors. Socrates remarks that Meletus brought charges against him on behalf of the poets, Lycon on behalf of the
orators, and Anytus on behalf of the politicians and craftsmen. (Ap. 23c2 – 5) A casual reading of the text suggests that Meletus is the most important of the three; he wrote out the charges against Socrates and it is he whom Socrates cross examines. Anytus, however, was most likely the bigger threat. (Ap. 18b2, 29c2 – 6, and 30b8)

Little is known about either Meletus or Lycon. According to the Euthydemus, Meletus was young and unknown to Socrates before the trial. (Euth. 2b7 – 10) His father, also named Meletus, was a poet. Lycon was an orator and an ardent defender of Athenian democracy. His son, Autolycus, was killed by the Thirty Tyrants. Anytus was a craftsman, and he was politically prominent in a way that Meletus and Lycon were not. He served as an Athenian general and was criminally prosecuted after Athens’ loss at Pylos in 409 B.C.E., but Aristotle reports that he “bribed the court and was acquitted.” Xenophon suggests that he was also implicated in earlier political corruption. In 403 B.C.E., Anytus returned from exile to help restore Athenian democracy after the Thirty were overthrown. Xenophon suggests that Anytus blamed Socrates for his son’s downfall and thus had a personal grudge against him.

5. Sophists

The Sophists were traveling teachers who, for a fee, would instruct pupils in various subjects. Most importantly, the Sophists taught rhetoric – the art of speaking well – a crucial political skill in democratic city-states. Especially in Athens, political advancement and even wealth were tied to one’s ability to make eloquent and persuasive speeches. As a result, wealthy parents often paid for their sons to be instructed in this valuable skill. Three of the most famous Sophists were Gorgias, Prodicus and Hippias whom Socrates mentions by name at Ap. 19d4 – 20c3.

Like many Athenians, Socrates and Plato were adamantly opposed to the Sophists’ activities for three main reasons. First, the Sophists taught for money, which was contrary both to common Greek notions about what was proper and the practice of traditional Greek philosophers. Second, as the Sophists traveled from town to town, they learned about a great variety of religious and ethical customs which they then infused into their teaching. In itself, teaching on the basis of worldly experience would have been unobjectionable, but their experience inclined the Sophists towards a kind of skepticism and relativism that denied the existence of objective and universal truths. Third, their expertise in rhetoric enabled the Sophists and their students to become adept at a kind of verbal trickery that allowed them to make implausible views seem persuasive and reasonable. (They could, according to a common criticism, make “the worse argument the stronger.”) Worse still, those who mastered their lessons were able to convince others of subversive beliefs for self-serving ends. The negative connotation of our word ‘sophistry’ derives from this aspect of the Sophists’ teaching.

Throughout his defense and in Plato’s various writings, Socrates tried to distinguish himself from the Sophists in all three respects. In the Apology and elsewhere, he repeatedly denies that he has ever accepted a fee for his philosophizing. Further, his elenctic methods were not intended to produce skepticism, but to find the truth. Moreover, his goal was not only to benefit himself, but to benefit all Athenians by encouraging them to seek virtue. Nonetheless, it may have been difficult for the average
Athenian to understand and appreciate the difference between Socrates’ activities and those of the Sophists.

5. Anaxagoras

Anaxagoras was the first of the pre-Socratic “natural” philosophers to have held that Mind (Nous) is a cause in the physical, material world. He was born in Asia Minor at around 500 B.C.E. Probably at around 480 B.C.E., he moved to Athens, becoming the first philosopher to settle there, and taught the young Pericles. In around 450 B.C.E, Anaxagoras was prosecuted and condemned for impiety by Pericles’ political opponents. He got out of prison, likely with Pericles’ help, and moved to Ionia where he died in exile in 428 B.C.

Anaxagoras wrote a book that Plato implies was on sale in Athens at the time of Socrates’ trial (Ap. 26e1). Most of this work is now lost, although fragments of it have survived. Anaxagoras’ philosophical predecessors were materialists, which means they thought that everything that exists is physical or material. Empedocles, for example, taught that everything is composed of four kinds of basic, indestructible particles: earth, air, fire, and water. Anaxagoras disagreed, claiming that “in everything there is a portion of everything.” More significantly, he diverged from his predecessors by arguing that Mind set in motion all things, Mind “has power over all things that have life, both greater and smaller,” and Mind is the cause of all order and arrangement. Though it is unlikely that Anaxagoras worked out this view in any detail, by introducing non-materialist principles into philosophy, he paved the way for many important philosophical developments.

Meletus asserts at Ap. 26d3 - 4 that Socrates says “the sun is stone and the moon is earth.” Presumably these are views that Anaxagoras held. Meletus’ remark is damaging to his case because it shows that he has confused Socrates’ teaching with that of Anaxagoras.

Sources and Further Reading:


