

"The Apology of Socrates" assumes that Socrates has no knowledge, that the Socratic method is nothing more than a critical attitude toward men's opinions, and that Socrates is easily distinguishable from Plato in the Dialogues. Robert Wellman's response to Professor Perkinson's paper questions all three assumptions.

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The Apology of Socrates

In the year 399 B.C. the Athenians killed Socrates. They found the seventy-one year old philosopher guilty of "corrupting the youth by his teaching." They also accused him of refusing to honor the gods of the city and introducing new divinities, but this was the lesser charge. In his defense speech during his trial Socrates pays little attention to this second charge, stating flatly that he does believe there are gods (*Apology*, 36).

What bothers him is the charge that he is a corrupter of youth. He exclaims to the jury that his accusers — Anytus and Meletus — almost made him forget who he was. They, he insists, "hardly uttered a word of truth." For his part he promises to tell "the whole truth: not, however, delivered after their manner in a set oration duly ornamented with words and phrases." He will eschew the art of eloquence, using the plain language he is accustomed to, since, he adds, "I am confident in the justice of my cause" (*Apology*, 17).

In his "apology" for himself what Socrates tries, in vain, to do is to explain to his fellow Athenians that the charge against him rests on a misconception of him and a misunderstanding of the mission he had pursued throughout his adult life. He tries to tell them that he was a teacher, unlike any they had ever known, and that his mission was to improve men, but in a way strange to the Athenians.

I

At the outset of his speech, Socrates insists that the Athenians have never understood him or what he was trying to do. Forty years earlier, he informs the jury, the comic playwright Aristophanes had maligned him in a play, *The Clouds*. He had painted Socrates as "an evil doer, and a curious person, who searches into things under the earth and in

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heaven, and . . . makes the worse appear the better cause; and . . . teaches the aforesaid doctrine to others" (*Apology*, 19).

In that play, Aristophanes presented Socrates as a natural philosopher and a sophist. Socrates now protests to the jury that he is not now, nor ever was, either of these. But why did Aristophanes write these things? Socrates does not answer this important question, but an analysis of the play itself goes a long way toward explaining Aristophanes' characterization of Socrates.

The Clouds is fundamentally a satirical criticism of the educational transformation that had taken place in Athens during the fifth century. In the play *Strepsiades*, deep in debt because of the extravagant "horsey" tastes of his young son Pheidippides, decides to consult the sophist, Socrates, who will teach him the wrong, or unjust logic, so that he may use it to argue his creditors out of their due. *Strepsiades* proves to be too dense to learn the wrong logic, but he gets Socrates to teach it to his son, who then quickly disposes, by argument, of the creditors' claim. Later the father and son have a violent argument — over the worth of Euripides as a playwright — that ends with the son soundly thrashing the father and then using the wrong logic to justify such an act. At this point, *Strepsiades* finally realizes the great danger inherent in this wrong logic, and he goes to smite Socrates and burn down his school. The play ends with *Strepsiades* shouting:

For with what aim did ye insult the Gods,
And pry around the dwellings of the moon?
Strike, smite them, spare them not, for many reasons,
But most because they have blasphemed the Gods.

Within the play, the central scene is a contest between the right logic, who represents the "old" education, and wrong logic, who represents the "new." Right logic pleads with Pheidippides to follow the old education, promising him "You will be as bright and fresh as a flower, spending your time in the gymnasium . . . you will go down to the Academy, and there, under the sacred olive trees, crowned with light reeds, you will run a race with a friend of your own age, to the scent of the yew tree and the white poplar that loses its leaves, enjoying all the delights of spring when the plane tree whispers to the elm. If you do what I tell you, and apply your whole mind to it, you will always have a powerful chest, a good complexion, broad shoulders, a short tongue, massive buttocks and a little rod . . . But if you follow present-day practices" — and here Aristophanes explicitly attacks Socrates' teaching — "you will have a pale complexion, narrow shoulders, a pigeon-chest, a long tongue, bony buttocks and a big rod . . ." (*The Clouds*, 1002).

The "old" education praised by Aristophanes consisted simply of gymnastics and music. Yet, he reminds his audience, it was this education that taught the "heroes of old to be hearty and bold," including those Athenians who had fought at Marathon (*The Clouds*, 986). In the old

days, Aristophanes says, the children marched in crocodile fashion to the gymnastics teachers and the music teacher — “even if the snow fell thick as flour” — singing some manly old air like “O the dread shout of War how it peals from afar,” or “Pallas the Stormer adore” (*ibid.*, 960-64). As a result of this education, Aristophanes claims that “honor and Truth were in fashion with you and sobriety bloomed on our shore” (*ibid.*, 958).

What the playwright ignores is the political context in which this educational program was embedded, a context that had altered drastically during the fifth century. In the second half of century there appeared a group of itinerant teachers, called sophists, who declared that virtue is knowledge and claimed to be able to teach political virtue to anyone who would attend them. They wandered from city to city where through panegyrics and harangues, as well as straightforward lectures on various questions of learning and life they displayed their skills and attracted pupils. They instructed their pupils in the various doctrines of the natural philosophers, but devoted most of their attention to the art of rhetoric. For at this time in Athens, the very time when Aristophanes was composing *The Clouds*, the ability to speak well was the prime requisite for a political leader. In the participant democracy, as Gomperz has noted, the chief instrument of government was the power of the tongue. Not just in the political arena — the assembly, the council, and so on — but in the law courts as well, words were the universal weapons. “The gift and faculty of speech was the sole road to honor and power.”¹ Once the young Athenian had learned how to speak effectively he was ready to enter the arena of public life, anxious to influence and direct the course of public decisions.

Like the natural philosophers, the sophists were intellectuals.² But whereas intellectuals had heretofore been isolated, exerting little or no influence on the political life of the city-state, they now, in the guise of sophists, became a truly powerful force. And if these intellectuals were right in their claim that virtue was knowledge then obviously only intellectuals, those who knew the arts of leadership, ought to be political leaders.

We are now in a position to begin to see why Aristophanes misunderstood and misrepresented Socrates in *The Clouds*. Aristophanes was an anti-intellectual, distressed by the increased power the intellectuals now enjoyed in Athens. In his opposition to them, Aristophanes made no distinctions among them, lumping together the natural philosophers, the sophists, and Socrates. Socrates was indeed an intellectual but he was neither a natural philosopher nor a sophist.

¹Theodor Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers*, Vol. I (New York: The Humanities Press, 1964), first published 1901.

²Gomperz uses this term to describe the sophists; Vol. I, p. 305.

In his apology, Socrates explains patiently that he had "nothing to do with physical speculations," he was not a natural philosopher; furthermore, he declared that many Athenians among those present could be brought forward to bear witness to this claim. As to the notion that he was a sophist, this too was false, but here the matter is more complex and subtle. For like the sophists he believed that virtue is knowledge, but he differed from them on the fundamental question as to whether or not virtue could be taught. He denied that he taught virtue to anyone, since he did not know what virtue was.

II

Many people called Socrates a wise man. How could this be if, as he claimed, he neither taught virtue nor even knew what virtue was? In order to explain how he got the reputation of a wise man, Socrates, in his "apology" recounts the story of Chaerephon and the oracle of Delphi. Chaerephon, an old friend of Socrates, went one time to Delphi to ask the oracle if anyone was wiser than Socrates. According to the story the oracle answered that there was no man wiser.³

When he heard what the oracle had said, Socrates could not believe it; he knew that he had "no wisdom, small or great" (*Apology*, 21). Finally he thought of a *method* of testing the claim. He would find someone who was wiser and thereby refute the oracle. Accordingly he sought out those who claimed to be wise: the politicians, the poets, even the artisans. But when he talked to them and questioned them he discovered that they were not really wise, even though others so regarded them and they so regarded themselves. At last he concluded that yes, perhaps he was wiser than they, since they knew nothing, but thought that they knew; whereas he, Socrates, neither knew nor thought that he knew.

Socrates' claim to wisdom then is a negative one; he is wise because he is aware of his own ignorance. Moreover, he insists that no man had wisdom; God alone, is wise (*Apology*, 23). So, he explains, when the oracle said that no man was wiser than Socrates, this was a case of God using him merely as an illustration; i.e., as if he had said, "He O men is the wisest, who like Socrates knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing" (*ibid.*). And thus it came about that Socrates was given a mission, a "divine mission," to go about the world "obedient to God," to search out that who claim to wisdom, and to question them. Upon discovering that they were not wise, he revealed this ignorance to them.

This inquisitorial mission won him many enemies, Socrates admits, enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind. For those whose wisdom he refuted became angry not with themselves, but with him. It is these

³This story hardly accounts for Socrates' reputation as Zeller points out since for it to make any sense he would have to be thought wise before Chaerephon consulted the oracle.

enemies, he declares, that now bring him to trial. And because they cannot identify any evil that he practices or teaches, they merely repeat the ready-made anti-illectual charges traditionally made against philosophers; that he corrupts the youth and blasphemes the gods.

These charges against him are, he repeats, false. At this point he proceeds to refute them in a way that displays the very inquisitorial method he had just described. Addressing himself to Meletus, one of his accusers, Socrates quickly reveals that Meletus had no interest at all in the youth of Athens. He shows that Meletus did not understand about such matters as the improvement or corruption of people. Socrates exposes him, first by forcing him to accept the outlandish position that everyone in Athens, except Socrates, helps to improve the youth, and then by getting him to admit that he is claiming that Socrates is intentionally harming himself if he is in fact corrupting the youth of Athens.

In his interchange with Meletus, Socrates forcefully exposes what Bréhier⁴ calls his fundamental doctrine: that no man is voluntarily wicked; evil springs from ignorance. Through Meletus he had made his point; the evil that Meletus is doing by accusing Socrates of corrupting the youth is the result of Meletus' ignorance — his ignorance of what Socrates does, and of such matters as the improvement and corruption of people. But in the very act of exposing Meletus and demonstrating his method of revealing ignorance, Socrates had made abundantly clear why he had so many enemies. He had treated Meletus harshly.

Socrates knows this. He admits that it is this very behavior that now threatens to bring him to an untimely end. But he has no regrets. "A man," he says, "who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living and dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong — acting the part of a good man, or a bad" (*Apology*, 28). He is, he repeats, a philosopher — a philosopher with a mission, a divine mission. It would be wrong for him, because of fear of death, to desert the practice and teaching of philosophy. Even if the jury frees him, he promises that he will continue to probe and question his fellow Athenians, continue to reveal their ignorance to them. Furthermore, Socrates now makes the startling claim that in obeying the common of God he has conferred upon the state the greatest good it has ever received. So, quite simply, and in direct contradiction to his accusers, Socrates insists that he has done more than anyone else ever to improve the city state of Athens. "I do nothing," he says, "but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your person or your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul" (*Apology*, 30).

What does Socrates mean by claiming that he has done more for Athens than anyone else? The answer lies in understanding first what

⁴Emile Bréhier, *The Hellenic Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 85.

Socrates means by the "improvement of the soul" and secondly of the way he tried to bring about this "improvement."

For Socrates "the improvement of the soul" consisted of an increase in knowledge. Like the sophists and the other intellectuals, Socrates held that virtue was knowledge; so to increase knowledge, to approach closer wisdom, was to become more virtuous. However, since no mortal man has complete wisdom, no mortal man is virtuous completely. All men, Socrates believes, do what they consider to be good; no man voluntarily does evil. But that which man considers to be good is never *the good*; it is never absolutely and completely the good. There is always some residue of evil inherent in our conceptions of what is good, simply because we are not wise, or infallible.

Socrates' role as a teacher is based on this conviction that man is fallible: man intends to be good, but he fails; he fails because he is ignorant of what the good really is. What Socrates tries to do, through questioning, is to get people to recognize that what they thought was good is, in fact, not good, or not as good as they thought. He tries to remind people they are fallible.

At first blush one might suppose that this negative approach to teaching would lead to scepticism. After all, if Socrates, or any teacher continually revealed our ignorance to us, so that we finally admitted that wisdom was not for us, then what other alternative do we have except scepticism and nihilism? This, I think, is exactly how the Athenians responded to the negative approach of Socrates. They could not believe that what he did could ever lead to the improvement of the soul. But, and this is the tragedy of Socrates' death, this was because, like Meletus, they did not understand the meaning of human improvement, nor how it takes place.

First of all, human improvement can take place only if man is fallible; infallibility leaves no room for improvement. And if man is fallible, then he can never know what the good is, so the *only* way he can improve is by discovering, or uncovering his own mistakes, his own errors. Therefore, rather than scepticism and nihilism, Socrates' negative approach leads to optimism *and* progress.

The Athenians (and many like them down to the present), argued that one can accept the fallibility of man but reject the negative approach to teaching. What is needed, according to this argument, is a teacher who transmits to youth the virtues, the values, the rules, the norms, etc., that have so far been accepted by the society. These values, of course, are to be transmitted as tentative since they are infallible absolutes and they will probably change in time, becoming replaced by others. According to this position a teacher can improve youth by teaching them the values or virtues accepted by the society. This is precisely what Socrates denies. He denies that virtues can be taught, denies that the teacher

can improve youth. Socrates' position is that improvement only comes about from within. No man can improve another; one is improved only through one's own efforts. All that a teacher can do is to help a student become aware of his errors, his mistakes, his limitations. It is up to the student to bring about the improvement. He does this by trying again; he makes a new conjecture or a new attempt.

In the *Meno* Socrates demonstrates how this works. The central scene in this dialogue is that between Socrates and Meno's slave boy. Drawing the figure of a square in the sand Socrates proceeds to ask the slave boy a series of questions about it. The boy eventually "discovers" the solution to the problem of doubling the square. At a certain point in the questioning Socrates administers what Meno calls the "torpedo shock." This is the conclusive revelation of one's own ignorance. Yet this torpedo shock is a stimulus to the growth of knowledge. For once the slave boy admitted that one of his guesses, or conjectures was wrong he proceeded to make another, a better, conjecture. The new conjecture is better because it avoids the error of the previous one.⁵

The Athenians had never known a teacher like Socrates: a teacher who did not teach, a teacher who did not tell his students what was good, nor what was true, nor even what was better or what was desirable. They could not understand a teacher who only told his students what was bad and what was false, what was evil and what was wrong. Nor could the Athenians accept Socrates' explanation that this was the way to persuade people to tend to the improvement of their souls.

III

The trouble with the Athenians was that they were not really concerned with human improvement. For if man is fallible then the *only* way to improve is through criticism — of the accepted values, the accepted virtues, criticism of what people thought was right, or good. What people held to be good or right can never be absolutely good or right (since man is fallible), but these accepted values and norms can serve as the starting point for future improvement. Through criticism people can uncover the limitations of these values, and thus be stimulated to create better ones.

A society that permits the comprehensive criticism of its values is an open society. An open society doesn't just happen; it comes about slowly, through the establishment of a critical tradition. This critical

⁵The notion of making the slave boy aware of his ignorance I take to be Socratic; but the notion of recollection of ideas (the theory of innate ideas), I take to be Platonic. In this connection see K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London, Routledge & Kegan, Paul, 1962, 4th Edition) Chapter 3, esp. footnote 8 and Alexander Sesonske, "Knowing and Saying: The Structure of Plato's *Meno*" in *Plato's Meno* edited by Alexander Sesonske and Noel Fleming (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1965). Here I should express my great indebtedness to Karl Popper's interpretation of Plato. My analysis of Socrates grew out of my reading of the work by Popper.

tradition is usually embodied in institutions that encourage criticism and protect critics. Frequent, free elections, together with two or more political parties and secret balloting are all institutions that encourage criticism and protect critics. A bill of rights, as well as the separation of powers together with a system of checks and balances are additional institutions that protect critics. Athens had some of these institutions but not enough to protect Socrates.

He was well aware of this as is evident from his remarks on why he avoided any public service to the state. Quite bluntly he admits that if he had engaged in politics he would "have perished long ago and done no good either to you or to myself" (*Apology*, 31). In the *Crito* he again discusses the responsibility the critic of the state takes on, and the dangers that he faces. The critic of the state he says, is an expert; he has an understanding of what is just and unjust, good and evil, honorable and dishonorable (*Crito*, 48). But unlike other experts, i.e., the physical trainer, the critic of the state is unprotected and vulnerable. The physical trainer is protected by the traditions and institutions connected with the art of physical training, so that when the physical trainer criticizes his pupils they accept his censure, admit their errors, and try to improve.

For Socrates the role of the physical trainer was like that of the critic of the state. The physical trainer did not know what a perfect athlete was. His job was not to tell or show his students how to be athletes, but rather to criticize them, to make them aware of their mistakes. From him the students learned what errors they had made, what evils to avoid. The critic of the state functioned in the same way; he did not know what the perfect state was, he merely uncovered the evils of the existing state. But unlike the physical trainer, the critic of the state is unprotected by a critical tradition. Socrates, in fact, was as much the victim of this absence of a critical tradition in Athens as he was of the accusations of Meletus and Anytus. Indeed the *Crito* may be read as an account of how Socrates attempted to teach the Athenians that they must establish institutions to protect the critics of the state.

In this dialogue which took place in jail two days before his death, Socrates patiently explains to Crito why he cannot escape and flee Athens. It would be wrong for him to leave, he says, for by such an act he would renounce and deny his divine mission. That mission was to help his fellow Athenians improve themselves and their state by serving as a gadfly, a critic who made them aware of their mistakes and their errors.

The Athenians' condemnation of him had been a mistake, an act of injustice. Moreover, his death will be an even greater injustice. But to make them aware of their mistake and to show them the injustice of their ways, Socrates must accept the fate they decreed him. In effect, then, in the *Crito* Socrates is agreeing to become a martyr, not for any