The Defense Speech of Socrates

Plato

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In this excerpt, Socrates stands before the Athenian jury consisting of 501 men, defending himself against the accusations that he does not believe in the gods the state believes in and that he corrupts the youth through his public conduct. He addresses both the jury as a whole and Meletus, the official prosecutor, denying both accusations. In the end he is found guilty and sentenced to death, yet he receives the verdict with remarkable courage, expressing neither fear nor remorse.

How you, men of Athens, have been affected by my accusers, I do not know; but I, for my part, almost forgot my own identity, so persuasively did they talk; and yet there is hardly a word of truth in what they have said. But I was most amazed by one of the many lies that they told — when they said that you must be on your guard not to be deceived by my eloquence. For I [...] am not in the least eloquent, unless indeed they call eloquent whoever speaks the truth; for if this is what they mean, I would agree that I am an orator [...].

As I mentioned, my accusers have said little or nothing true; but you shall hear from me nothing but the truth. Not, however, [...] speeches [...] carefully arranged, but [...] things said at random with the words that happen to occur to me. For I trust that what I say is just [...]. This is the first time I have come before the court, although I am seventy years old; I am therefore an utter foreigner to the manner of speech here. Hence, [...] I make this request of you, a fair one as it seems to me, that you disregard the manner of my speech [...] and observe and pay attention merely to [...] whether what I say is just or not. [...]

Many accusers have risen up against me before you, [...] saying, "There is a certain Socrates, a wise man, a ponderer over the things in the air and one who has investigated the things beneath the earth and who makes the weaker argument the stronger." These, men of Athens, who have spread such rumors, are my dangerous enemies. For those who hear them think that men who investigate these matters do not even believe in gods.

Besides, these accusers are many and have been making their accusations already for a long time, and moreover they spoke to you at an age at which you would believe them most readily (some of you in youth, most of you in childhood) [...]. But the most unreasonable thing of all is this, that it is not even possible to know and speak their names, except when one of them happens to be a writer of comedies. [...] I am compelled in making my defense to fight [...] with shadows [...].

There are two classes of my accusers — one those who have just brought their accusation, the other those who, as I was just saying, brought it long ago. [...] I must defend myself first against the latter [...].

What is the accusation from which the false prejudice against me has arisen, in which Meletus trusted when he brought this suit against me. [...] "Socrates is a criminal [...], investigating the things beneath the earth and in the heavens and making the weaker argument stronger and teaching others these same things." Something of that sort it is. For you yourselves saw these things in Aristophanes' comedy, a Socrates being carried about there, proclaiming that he was treading on air and uttering a vast deal of other nonsense, about which I know nothing [...]. [...] And I offer as witnesses most of yourselves, and I ask you to inform one another and to tell, all those of you who ever heard me conversing — and there are many such among you — [...] if anyone ever heard me talking [...] about such matters. [...] And if you have heard from anyone that I [...] teach people and that I make money by it, that is not true ei-

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ther. Although this also seems to me to be a fine thing, if one might be able to teach people, as Gorgias [...] and Prodicus [...] and Hippias [...] are. [...]

Now perhaps someone might rejoin: "But, Socrates, what is the trouble about you? [...]" So listen. [...] And [...] do not interrupt me [...], even if I seem to you to be boasting; for the word which I speak is not mine, but [...] I will offer you the god of Delphi as a witness. You know Chaerephon, I suppose. [...] You know the kind of man Chaerephon was, how impetuous in whatever he undertook. Well, once he went to Delphi and made so bold as to ask the oracle this question [...] if there were anyone wiser than I. Now the Pythia replied that there was no one wiser. And about these things his brother here will bear you witness, since Chaerephon is dead. [...]

When I heard this, I thought to myself: "What in the world does the god mean, and what riddle is he propounding? For I am conscious that I am not wise [...]." What then does he mean by declaring that I am the wisest? [...] I went to one of those who had a reputation for wisdom, thinking that there, if anywhere, I should prove the utterance wrong and should show the oracle "This man is wiser than I, but you said I was wisest." So examining this man [...] and conversing with him, this man seemed to me [...] to be wise to many other people and especially to himself, but not to be so; and then I tried to show him that he thought he was wise, but was not. As a result, I became hateful to him and to many of those present; and so, as I went away, I thought to myself, "I am wiser than this man; for [...] this man thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either." [...]

After this then I went on from one to another, perceiving that I was hated [...], but nevertheless I thought I must consider the god's business of the highest importance. So I had to go, investigating the meaning of the oracle [...]. And [...], this, I do declare, was my experience: those who had the most reputation seemed to me to be almost the most deficient [...].

After the public men I went to the poets [...], thinking that there I should prove by actual test that I was less wise than they. So, taking up the poems of theirs that seemed to me to have been most carefully elaborated [...], I asked them what they meant [...]. Now I am ashamed to tell you the truth, [...] but still it must be told. For there was hardly a man present [...] who would not speak better than they about the poems they themselves had composed. So [...] I [...] recognized this, that what they composed they composed not by wisdom, but [...] because they were inspired, like the prophets and givers of oracles [...]. And at the same time I perceived that they, on account of their poetry, thought that they were the wisest of men in other things as well, in which they were not. So I went away from them also thinking that I was superior to them in the same thing in which I excelled the public men.

Finally then I went to the hand-workers. [...] And [...] they did know what I did not, and in this way they were wiser than I. But, men of Athens, the good artisans also seemed to me to have the same failing as the poets; because of practicing his craft well, each one thought he was very wise in the other most important matters, and this folly of theirs obscured that wisdom [...].

Now from this investigation, [...] I am called a wise man. For on each occasion those who are present think I am wise in the matters in which I confute someone else; but the fact is [...] likely that the god [...] merely uses my name, and makes me an example, as if he were to say: "This one of you, [...] is wisest, who, like Socrates, recognizes that he is in truth of no account in respect to wisdom." Therefore I am still even now going about and searching and investigating at the god's behest anyone, [...] who I think is wise [...]. And in addition to these things, the young men who [...] accompany me of their own accord, find pleasure in hearing people being examined, and often imitate me themselves, and then they undertake to examine others; and then, I suppose, they find a great plenty of people who think they know something, but know little or nothing. As a result, those who are examined by them are angry with me, instead of being angry with themselves, and say that "Socrates is a most abominable person and is corrupting the youth." And when anyone asks them "by doing or teaching what?" they have nothing to say [...]. Since, then, they are jealous [...] they have filled your ears [...] with vehement slanders. From among them Meletus attacked me, and Anytus and Lycon, Meletus angered on account of the poets, and Anytus on account of the artisans and the public men, and Lycon on account of the orators [...].

There you have the truth, men of Athens, and I speak without hiding anything from you [...]. And yet I know pretty well that I am making myself hated by just that conduct; which is also a proof that I am speaking the truth and that this is the prejudice against me and these are its causes. [...]

Now so far as the accusations are concerned which my first accusers made against me, this is a sufficient defense before you; but against Meletus, the good and patriotic, as he says, and the later ones, I will try to defend myself next. So once more, as if these were another set of accusers, let us take up in turn their sworn statement. It is

about as follows: it states that Socrates is a wrongdoer because he corrupts the youth and does not believe in the gods the state believes in, but in other new spiritual beings. [...] But let us examine each point of this accusation.

He says I am a wrongdoer because I corrupt the youth. [...] Come here, Meletus, tell me: don't you consider it of great importance that the youth be as good as possible? "I do." Come now, tell these gentlemen who makes them better? [...] Do you see, Meletus, that you are silent and cannot tell? [...] But tell, my good man, who makes them better? "The laws." But that is not what I ask, [...] but what man [...]. "These men, Socrates, the judges." What are you saying, Meletus? Are these gentlemen able to instruct the youth, and do they make them better? "Certainly." All, or some of them [...] ? "All." Well said [...]. But how about this? Do these listeners make them better, or not? "These also." And how about the senators? "The senators also." [...] Those in the assembly [...]? "They also." All the Athenians, then, as it seems, make them excellent, except myself, and I alone corrupt them. Is this what you mean? "Very decidedly, that is what I mean." [...].

Certainly [...] it would be a great state of blessedness in the case of the youth if one alone corrupts them, and the others do them good. But, Meletus, you show clearly enough that you never thought about the youth, and you exhibit plainly your own carelessness [...]. But besides, tell us, for heaven's sake, Meletus [...]. Do not the bad do some evil to those who are with them [...] and the good some good? "Certainly." Is there then anyone who prefers to be injured by his associates rather than benefited? [...] "Of course not." [...] Do you hale me in here on the ground that I am corrupting the youth and making them worse voluntarily or involuntarily? "Voluntarily I say." What then, Meletus? Are you at your age so much wiser than I at my age, that you have recognized that the evil always do some evil to those nearest them, and the good some good; whereas I have reached such a depth of ignorance that I do not even know this, that if I make anyone of my associates bad I am in danger of getting some harm from him, so that I do this great evil voluntarily, as you say? I don't believe this, Meletus, nor do I think anyone else in the world does! but either I do not corrupt them, or if I corrupt them, I do it involuntarily, so that you are lying in both events. But if I corrupt them involuntarily, for such involuntary errors the law is not to hale people into court, but to take them and instruct and admonish them in private. [...] But you avoided associating with me and instructing me, and were unwilling to do so, but you hale me in here [...].

But nevertheless, tell us, how do [...] I corrupt the youth? Or is it evident, according to the indictment you brought, that it is by teaching them not to believe in the gods the state believes in, but in other new spiritual beings? Do you not say that it is by teaching this that I corrupt them? "Very decidedly that is what I say." Then, Meletus, [...] I am unable to understand whether you say that I teach that there are some gods [...], however, are not the gods whom the state believes in [...] or you say that I do not myself believe in gods at all and that I teach this unbelief to other people. "That is what I say, that you do not believe in gods at all." You amaze me, Meletus! Why do you say this? Do I not even believe that the sun or yet the moon are gods, as the rest of mankind do? "No, by Zeus, judges, since he says that the sun is a stone and the moon earth." Do you think [...], my dear Meletus, [...] these gentlemen [...] are so unversed [...] as not to know, that the books of Anaxagoras [...] are full of such utterances? [...] But for heaven's sake, do you think this of me, that I do not believe there is any god? "No, by Zeus, you don't, not in the least." You cannot be believed, Meletus, not even, as it seems to me, by yourself. [...]

Meletus, answer [...]. Is there any human being who believes that there are things pertaining to human beings, but no human beings? [...] There is not [...]; if you do not wish to answer, I say it to you and these others here. But answer at least the next question. Is there anyone who believes spiritual things exist, but does not believe in spirits? "There is not." [...] But if I believe in spiritual beings, it is quite inevitable that I believe also in spirits; is it not so? It is; for I assume that you agree, since you do not answer. But do we not think the spirits are gods or children of gods? Yes, or no? "Certainly." Then if I believe in spirits, as you say, if spirits are a kind of gods, it would be puzzling to say I do not believe in gods; but if, on the other hand, spirits are a kind of [...] children of gods, by nymphs or by any others, whoever their mothers are said to be, what man would believe that there are children of gods, but no gods? [...] Meletus, you certainly must have brought this suit either to make a test of us or because you were loss as to what true wrongdoing you could accuse me of; but there is no way for you to persuade any man who has even a little sense that it is possible for the same person to believe in spiritual and divine existences and again for the same person not to believe in spirits or gods [...].

Well then, men of Athens, that I am not a wrongdoer according to Meletus's indictment, seems to me not to need much of a defence, but what has been said is enough. [...] But perhaps someone might say: "Are you then not ashamed, Socrates,

of having followed such a pursuit, that you are now in danger of being put to death as a result?" [...] To which I reply: You do not speak well [...] if you think a man in whom there is even a little merit ought to consider danger of life or death [...] when he does things [...]. For according to your argument all the demigods would be bad who died at Troy, including the son of Thetis, who [...] feared much more to live as a coward and not to avenge his friends [...]. For thus it is, men of Athens, in truth; [...] a man [...] must [...] remain and run his risks, considering neither death nor any other thing more than disgrace. [...]

For to fear death, gentlemen, is nothing else than [...] thinking one knows what one does not know. For no one knows whether death be not even the greatest of all blessings to man, but they fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. [...] Perhaps [...] in this matter also I differ from other men in this way, and if I were to say that I am wiser in anything, it would be in this, that not knowing very much about the other world [...]. So I shall never fear or avoid those things concerning which I do not know whether they are good or bad rather than those which I know are bad.

And therefore, even if you [...] say to me [...]: "Socrates, this time we will [...] let you go, on this condition, [...] that you no longer spend your time [...] in philosophy, and if you are caught doing so again you shall die"; [...] I should say to you, Men of Athens, I respect and love you, but I shall obey the god rather than you, and while I live and am able to continue, I shall never give up philosophy or stop exhorting you and pointing out the truth [...]. For know that the god commands me to do this, and I believe that no greater good ever came to pass in the city than my service to the god. For I go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care for your persons or your property more than for the perfection of your souls [...]; and I tell you that virtue does not come from money, but from virtue comes money and all other good things to man, both to the individual and to the state. [...] Therefore I say to you, men of Athens, [...] I shall not change my conduct even if I am to die many times over. [...]

[...] If you kill me, [...] you will not injure me so much as yourselves; for neither Meletus nor Anytus could injure me; that would be impossible, for I believe it is not God's will that a better man be injured by a worse. He might, however, perhaps kill me or banish me or disfranchise me; and perhaps he thinks he would thus inflict great injuries upon me, and others may think so, but I do not; I think he does himself a much greater injury by doing what he is doing now — killing a man unjustly.

[...] Men of Athens, I am now making my defence not for my own sake, as one might imagine, but far more for yours [...]. For if you put me to death, you will not easily find another, who [...] attaches himself to the city as a gadfly to a horse, which, though large and well bred, is sluggish on account of his size and needs to be aroused by stinging. I think the god fastened me upon the city [...] and I go about arousing, and urging and reproaching each one of you [...]. I am [...] a kind of gift from the god, [...]; for I have neglected all my own affairs and have been [...] always busy in your interest, coming to each one of you individually like a father or an elder brother and urging you to care for virtue [...]. If I derived any profit from this and received pay for these exhortations, there would be some sense in it; but now you yourselves see that my accusers [...] have not been able to [...] produce a witness to testify that I ever exacted or asked pay of anyone. For I think I have a sufficient witness that I speak the truth, namely, my poverty.

Perhaps it may seem strange that I go about and interfere in other people's affairs to give this advice in private, but do not venture to come before your assembly and advise the state. But the reason for this, as you have heard me say at many times and places, is that something divine and spiritual comes to me [...]. I have had this from my childhood; it is a sort of voice that comes to me [...]. This it is which opposes my engaging in politics. And I think this opposition is a very good thing; for you may be quite sure, men of Athens, that if I had undertaken to go into politics, I should have been put to death long ago and should have done no good to you or to myself. [...]

A man who really fights for the right, if he is to preserve his life for even a little while, must be a private citizen, not a public man. [...] You will find that through all my life, both in public [...] and in private, I have always been the same as now [...]. I ask questions, and whoever wishes may answer and hear what I say. [...] But why then do some people love to spend much of their time with me? You have heard the reason, men of Athens; for I told you the whole truth; it is because they like to listen when those are examined who think they are wise and are not so; for it is amusing. But, as I believe, I have been commanded to do this by the God through oracles and dreams and in every way in which any man was ever commanded by divine power to do anything whatsoever.

This, Athenians, is true and easily tested. For if I am corrupting some of the young men [...], surely some of them who have grown older, if they recognize that I ever gave them any bad advice when they were young, ought now to have come forward to accuse me. Or if they did not wish

to do it themselves, some of their relatives [...] ought now to tell the facts. And there are many of them present, whom I see; first Crito here, [...] then there is Lysanias [...] and also Antiphon [...]. Then here are others whose brothers joined in my conversations, Nicostratus [...], and Paralus [...]. Adimantus [...] whose brother is Plato here; and Aeantodorus, whose brother Apollodorus is present. And I can mention to you many others [...]. But you will find that the exact opposite is the case, gentlemen, and that they are all ready to help me [...]?

Well, gentlemen, this, [...] is about all I have to say in my defense. Perhaps someone among you may be offended when he remembers his own conduct, if he, even in a case of less importance than this, begged and besought the judges with many tears, and brought forward his children to arouse compassion, and many other friends and relatives; whereas I will do none of these things, though I am, apparently, in the very greatest danger. [...] I too have relatives, [...] and, men of Athens, I have three sons, one nearly grown up, and two still children; but nevertheless I shall not bring any of them here and beg you to acquit me. And why shall I not do so? Not because I am stubborn, Athenians, or lack respect for you. Whether I fear death or not is another matter, but for the sake of my good name and yours and that of the whole state, I think it is not right for me to do any of these things in view of my age and my reputation [...]; for at any rate the opinion prevails that Socrates is in some way superior to most men. [...] I have often seen men who have some reputation behaving in the strangest manner, when they were on trial, as if they thought they were going to suffer something terrible if they were put to death, just as if they would be immortal if you did not kill them. It seems to me that they are a disgrace to the state and that any stranger might say that those of the Athenians who excel in virtue, men whom they themselves honor with offices and other marks of esteem, are no better than women. Such acts, men of Athens, we who have any reputation at all ought not to commit, and if we commit them you ought not to allow it, but you should make it clear that you will be much more ready to condemn a man who puts before you such pitiable scenes and makes the city ridiculous than one who keeps quiet. But apart from the question of reputation, gentlemen, I think it is not right to implore the judge or to get acquitted by begging; we ought to inform and convince him. For the judge is not here to grant favors in matters of justice, but to give judgement; and his oath binds him not to do favors according to his pleasure, but to judge according to the laws [...]

[The jury finds Socrates guilty, and Meletus asks for the penalty of death.]

I am not grieved, men of Athens, at this vote of condemnation you have cast against me, and that for many reasons, among them the fact that your decision was not a surprise to me. I am much more surprised by the number of votes for and against it; for I did not expect so small a majority, but a large one. [...]. Well, then, what shall I propose as an alternative? Clearly that which I deserve, shall I not? And what do I deserve to suffer or to pay, because in my life I did not keep quiet, but neglecting what most men care for — money-making and property, and military offices, and public speaking, and the various offices and plots and parties that come up in the state — and thinking that I was really too honorable to engage in those activities and live, refrained from those things by which I should have been of no use to you or to myself, and devoted myself to conferring upon each citizen individually what I regard as the greatest benefit? [...] What, then, does such a man as I deserve? Some good thing, men of Athens, if I must propose something truly in accordance with what I deserve [...] I propose free meals in the Prytaneum.

Perhaps some of you think that [...] I am speaking arrogantly; but that is not the case. The truth is rather that I am convinced that I never intentionally wronged anyone; but I cannot convince you of this [...]. Since, then, I am convinced that I never wronged any one, I am certainly not going to wrong myself, and to say of myself that I deserve anything bad [...]. [...] What penalty shall I propose? Imprisonment? And why should I live in prison a slave to those who may be in authority? Or shall I propose a fine, with imprisonment until it is paid? But that is the same as what I said just now, for I have no money to pay with. Shall I then propose exile as my penalty? Perhaps you would accept that. I must indeed be possessed by a great love of life if I am so irrational as not to know that if you, who are my fellow citizens, could not endure my conversation and my words, but found them too irksome and disagreeable, so that you are now seeking to be rid of them, others will not be willing to endure them. No, men of Athens, they certainly will not. [...]

Perhaps someone might say, "Socrates, can you not go away from us and live quietly, without talking?" Now this is the hardest thing to make some of you believe. For if I say that such conduct would be disobedience to the god and that therefore I cannot keep quiet, you will think I am jesting and will not believe me; and if again I say that to talk every day about virtue and the other things about

which you hear me talking and examining myself and others is the greatest good to man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living, you will believe me still less. [...]

If I had money, I would have proposed a fine, as large as I could pay; for that would have done me no harm. But as it is — I have no money, unless you are willing to impose a fine which I could pay. I might perhaps pay a mina of silver. So I propose that penalty; but Plato here, men of Athens, and Crito and Critobulus, and Aristobulus tell me to propose a fine of thirty minas, saying that they are sureties for it. So I propose a fine of that amount, and these men, who are amply sufficient, will be my sureties.

[The jury votes again and sentences Socrates to death.]

It is no long time, men of Athens, which you gain, and for that those who wish to cast a slur upon the state will give you the name and blame of having killed Socrates, a wise man; for, you know, those who wish to revile you will say I am wise, even though I am not. Now if you had waited a little while, what you desire would have come to you of its own accord; for you see how old I am [...]. I say this not to all of you, but to those who voted for my death. [...]

Perhaps you think, gentlemen, that I have been convicted through lack of such words as would have moved you to acquit me [...]. Far from it. And yet it is through a lack that I have been convicted, not however a lack of words, but of impudence and shamelessness, and of willingness to say to you such things as you would have liked best to hear. You would have liked to hear me wailing and lamenting and doing and saying many things which are, as I maintain, unworthy of me — such things as you are accustomed to hear from others. But I did not think at the time that I ought, on account of the danger I was in, to do anything unworthy of a free man, nor do I now repent of having made my defence as I did, but I much prefer to die after such a defence than to live after a defence of the other sort. For neither in the court nor in war ought I or any other man to plan to escape death by every possible means. In battles it is often plain that a man might avoid death by throwing down his arms and begging mercy of his pursuers [...]. But, gentlemen, it is not hard to escape death; it is much harder to escape wickedness, for that runs faster than death. And now I, since I am slow and old, am caught by the slower runner, and my accusers, who are clever and quick, by the faster, wickedness.

And now I shall go away convicted by you and sentenced to death [...]. And I abide by my penalty [...]. Perhaps these things had to be so, and I think they are well. [...] I am now at the time when men most do prophesy, the time just before death. And I say to you, [...] who have slain me, that punishment will come upon you [...] after my death, far more grievous in sooth than the punishment of death which you have imposed upon me. [...] For if you think that by putting men to death you will prevent anyone from reproaching you [...] you are mistaken. [...]

So with this prophecy to you who condemned me I take my leave. But with those who voted for my acquittal I should like to converse about this which has happened [...] before I go to the place where I must die. [...] A wonderful thing has happened to me. [...] As you [...] see, this thing which might be thought [...] the greatest of evils has come upon me; but the divine sign did not oppose me either when I left my home in the morning, or when I came here to the court, or at any point of my speech [...].

Let us consider in another way also how good reason there is to hope that it is a good thing. For the state of death is one of two things: either it is virtually nothingness, [...] or it is, as people say, a change and migration of the soul from this to another place. And if it is [...] like a sleep in which the sleeper does not even dream, death would be a wonderful gain. [...] But on the other hand, if death is [...] a change of habitation from here to some other place, and if what we are told is true, that all the dead are there, what greater blessing could there be [...]? I am willing to die many times over, if these things are true; for I personally should find the life there wonderful, when I met Palamedes or Ajax [...] or any other men [...] who lost their lives through an unjust judgement, and compared my experience with theirs. [...] And the greatest pleasure would be to pass my time in examining and investigating the people there, as I do those here, to find out who among them is wise and who thinks he is when he is not. [...]

You [...] must bear in mind this one truth, that no evil can come to a good man either in life or after death, and God does not neglect him. [...] I see plainly that it was better for me to die now and be freed from troubles. [...] I am not at all angry with those who condemned me or with my accusers. [...] I make this request [...]: when my sons grow up [...] punish them by troubling them as I have troubled you; if they seem to you to care for money or anything else more than for virtue, and if they think they amount to something when they do not, rebuke them as I have rebuked you because they do not care for what they ought, and think they amount to something when they are worth nothing. If you do this, both I and my sons

shall have received just treatment from you. But now the time has come to go away. I go to die, and you to live; but which of us goes to the better lot, is known to none but God.

References

1. Plato, *Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999).