

“Seek Truth Rather Than Escape Death,” by Plato



Socrates, Thoemmes

About the author. . . . There is little doubt that Plato conversed with Socrates during Socrates' last years. Plato was probably in his early 30's when Socrates was charged, and it is quite possible he was forced to leave Athens after Socrates was executed. Perhaps, either as a result of Socrates' trial or of the fact that Plato came from an aristocratic family, Plato distrusted democracy as an effective form of government. With respect to the *psyche*, Plato struggled with the problem of the soul having parts or being divisible, yet being eternal. He argues in *Phaedo* that life is the preparation for death. At death, the soul separates from the body and is released from the body's restrictions.

About the work. . . . Plato continues his account of the trial of Socrates. In this, the final part of *The Apology*,¹ Socrates is found guilty of the charges by a vote of 281 to 220; undoubtedly, the ethical seriousness with which Socrates spent his final days profoundly affected Plato as the young student. Socrates now explains why he has nothing to fear from death. Socrates argues that even if the soul were not immortal, death would be a good. Nevertheless, Socrates did not doubt the immortality of the soul.

1. Plato, *The Apology* (380 B.C.) in *The Dialogues of Plato* (2. Vols.) Trans. Benjamin Jowett, New York, Random House, 1937.

From the reading...

“Reflecting that I was really too honest a man to be a politician and live, I did not go where I could do no good to you or to myself; but where I could do the greatest good privately to every one of you, thither I went, and sought to persuade every man among you that he must look to himself, and seek virtue and wisdom before he looks to his private interests, and look to the state before he looks to the interests of the state; and that this should be the order which he observes in all his actions.”

Ideas of Interest from the *The Apology*, II

1. Why doesn't Socrates plead for a lesser charge in order to save his life? Why did he feel that he couldn't accept exile?
2. Explain how Socrates' argument that death should not be feared rests on “the Socratic Paradox.”²
3. Characterize as clearly as possible Socrates' conception of the soul. Does the existence of the soul presuppose an afterlife? Explain why or why not from a Socratic point of view.
4. In what way do you think Socrates' defense exhibits irony? How is his irony related to his being a “gadfly”?

2. Socrates believed that we all seek what we think is most genuinely in our own interest. If we act with knowledge, then we will obtain what is good for our soul, but if the consequences of our action are not what is good for our soul, then we had to have acted in ignorance. In a sense, for Socrates, there is no ethical good or evil—instead “knowledge” is logically equivalent to “good,” “excellence,” or “*areté*,” and “ignorance” is logically equivalent to “evil” or what is “harmful.” Since we never intentionally harm ourselves, if harm happens to us, then, at some point, we acted with a lack of knowledge. In this manner, Socrates concludes we are “morally responsible” for obtaining knowledge.

Reading from *The Apology*, II

[*Socrates Is Found Guilty*]

[Response to the Verdict]

There are many reasons why I am not grieved, O men of Athens, at the vote of condemnation. I expected it, and am only surprised that the votes are so nearly equal; for I had thought that the majority against me would have been far larger; but now, had thirty votes gone over to the other side, I should have been acquitted. And I may say, I think, that I have escaped Meletus. I may say more; for without the assistance of Anytus and Lycon, any one may see that he would not have had a fifth part of the votes, as the law requires, in which case he would have incurred a fine of a thousand drachmae.

And so he proposes death as the penalty. And what shall I propose on my part, O men of Athens? Clearly that which is my due. And what is my due? What return shall be made to the man who has never had the wit to be idle during his whole life; but has been careless of what the many care for—wealth, and family interests, and military offices, and speaking in the assembly, and magistracies, and plots, and parties. Reflecting that I was really too honest a man to be a politician and live, I did not go where I could do no good to you or to myself; but where I could do the greatest good privately to every one of you, thither I went, and sought to persuade every man among you that he must look to himself, and seek virtue and wisdom before he looks to his private interests, and look to the state before he looks to the interests of the state; and that this should be the order which he observes in all his actions. What shall be done to such an one? Doubtless some good thing, O men of Athens, if he has his reward; and the good should be of a kind suitable to him. What would be a reward suitable to a poor man who is your benefactor, and who desires leisure that he may instruct you? There can be no reward so fitting as maintenance in the Prytaneum, O men of Athens, a reward which he deserves far more than the citizen who has won the prize at Olympia in the horse or chariot race, whether the chariots were drawn by two horses or by many. For I am in want, and he has enough; and he only gives you the appearance of happiness, and I give you the reality. And if I am to estimate the penalty fairly, I should say that maintenance in the Prytaneum is the just return.

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The Prison of Socrates and Statue of Pan, Theatre Bacchus, Library of Congress

[Why Exile Is Not Acceptable]

Perhaps you think that I am braving you in what I am saying now, as in what I said before about the tears and prayers. But this is not so. I speak rather because I am convinced that I never intentionally wronged any one, although I cannot convince you—the time has been too short; if there were a law at Athens, as there is in other cities, that a capital cause should not be decided in one day, then I believe that I should have convinced you. But I cannot in a moment refute great slanders; and, as I am convinced that I never wronged another, I will assuredly not wrong myself. I will not say of myself that I deserve any evil, or propose any penalty. Why should I? because I am afraid of the penalty of death which Meletus proposes? When I do not know whether death is a good or an evil, why should I propose a penalty which would certainly be an evil? Shall I say imprisonment? And why should I live in prison, and be the slave of the magistrates of the year—of the Eleven? Or shall the penalty be a fine, and imprisonment until the fine is paid? There is the same objection. I should have to lie in prison, for money I have none, and cannot pay. And if I say exile (and this may possibly be the penalty which you will affix), I must indeed be blinded by the love of life, if I am so irrational as to expect that when you, who are my own citizens, cannot endure my discourses and words, and have found them so grievous and odious that you will have no more of them, others are likely to endure me. No indeed, men of Athens, that is not very likely. And what a life should I lead, at my age, wandering from city to city, ever changing my place of exile, and always being driven out! For I am quite sure that wherever I go, there, as here, the young men will

flock to me; and if I drive them away, their elders will drive me out at their request; and if I let them come, their fathers and friends will drive me out for their sakes.

From the reading...

“I would rather die having spoken after my manner, than speak in your manner and live... The difficulty, my friends, is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness; for that runs faster than death.”

Someone will say: Yes, Socrates, but cannot you hold your tongue, and then you may go into a foreign city, and no one will interfere with you? Now I have great difficulty in making you understand my answer to this. For if I tell you that to do as you say would be a disobedience to the God, and therefore that I cannot hold my tongue, you will not believe that I am serious; and if I say again that daily to discourse about virtue, and of those other things about which you hear me examining myself and others, is the greatest good of man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living, you are still less likely to believe me. Yet I say what is true, although a thing of which it is hard for me to persuade you. Also, I have never been accustomed to think that I deserve to suffer any harm. Had I money I might have estimated the offence at what I was able to pay, and not have been much the worse. But I have none, and therefore I must ask you to proportion the fine to my means. Well, perhaps I could afford a mina, and therefore I propose that penalty: Plato, Crito, Critobulus, and Apollodorus, my friends here, bid me say thirty minae, and they will be the sureties. Let thirty minae be the penalty; for which sum they will be ample security to you. ...

[Truth, More Important Than Life]

Not much time will be gained, O Athenians, in return for the evil name which you will get from the detractors of the city, who will say that you killed Socrates, a wise man; for they will call me wise, even although I am not wise, when they want to reproach you. If you had waited a little while, your desire would have been fulfilled in the course of nature. For I am far advanced in years, as you may perceive, and not far from death. I am speaking now not to all of you, but only to those who have condemned me to death. And I have another thing to say to them: you think that I was con-

victed because I had no words of the sort which would have procured my acquittal—I mean, if I had thought fit to leave nothing undone or unsaid. Not so; the deficiency which led to my conviction was not of words—certainly not. But I had not the boldness or impudence or inclination to address you as you would have liked me to do, weeping and wailing and lamenting, and saying and doing many things which you have been accustomed to hear from others, and which, as I maintain, are unworthy of me. I thought at the time that I ought not to do anything common or mean when in danger: nor do I now repent of the style of my defence; I would rather die having spoken after my manner, than speak in your manner and live. For neither in war nor yet at law ought I or any man to use every way of escaping death. Often in battle there can be no doubt that if a man will throw away his arms, and fall on his knees before his pursuers, he may escape death; and in other dangers there are other ways of escaping death, if a man is willing to say and do anything. The difficulty, my friends, is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness; for that runs faster than death. I am old and move slowly, and the slower runner has overtaken me, and my accusers are keen and quick, and the faster runner, who is unrighteousness, has overtaken them. And now I depart hence condemned by you to suffer the penalty of death,—they too go their ways condemned by the truth to suffer the penalty of villainy and wrong; and I must abide by my award—let them abide by theirs. I suppose that these things may be regarded as fated,—and I think that they are well.

[Socrates’ Advice]

And now, O men who have condemned me, I would fain prophesy to you; for I am about to die, and in the hour of death men are gifted with prophetic power. And I prophesy to you who are my murderers, that immediately after my departure punishment far heavier than you have inflicted on me will surely await you. Me you have killed because you wanted to escape the accuser, and not to give an account of your lives. But that will not be as you suppose: far otherwise. For I say that there will be more accusers of you than there are now; accusers whom hitherto I have restrained: and as they are younger they will be more inconsiderate with you, and you will be more offended at them. If you think that by killing men you can prevent some one from censuring your evil lives, you are mistaken; that is not a way of escape which is either possible or honourable; the easiest and the noblest way is not to be disabling others, but to be improving yourselves. This is the prophecy which I utter before my departure to the judges who have condemned me.

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Homer Enshrined, Smith, A History of Greece, 1855

Friends, who would have acquitted me, I would like also to talk with you about the thing which has come to pass, while the magistrates are busy, and before I go to the place at which I must die. Stay then a little, for we may as well talk with one another while there is time. You are my friends, and I should like to show you the meaning of this event which has happened to me. O my judges—for you I may truly call judges—I should like to tell you of a wonderful circumstance. Hitherto the divine faculty of which the internal oracle is the source has constantly been in the habit of opposing me even about trifles, if I was going to make a slip or error in any matter; and now as you see there has come upon me that which may be thought, and is generally believed to be, the last and worst evil. But the oracle made no sign of opposition, either when I was leaving my house in the morning, or when I was on my way to the court, or while I was speaking, at anything which I was going to say; and yet I have often been stopped in the middle of a speech, but now in nothing I either said or did touching the matter in hand has the oracle opposed me. What do I take to be the explanation of this silence? I will tell you. It is an intimation that what has happened to me is a good, and that those of us who think that death is an evil are in error. For the customary sign would surely have opposed me had I been going to evil and not to good.

[Argument That Death Is a Good]

Let us reflect in another way, and we shall see that there is great reason to hope that death is a good; for one of two things—either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain. For if a person were to select the night in which his sleep was undisturbed even by dreams, and were to compare with this the other days and nights of his life, and then were to tell us how many days and nights he had passed in the course of his life better and more pleasantly than this one, I think that any man, I will not say a private man, but even the great king will not find many such days or nights, when compared with the others. Now if death be of such a nature, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night. But if death is the journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the dead abide, what good, O my friends and judges, can be greater than this? If indeed when the pilgrim arrives in the world below, he is delivered from the professors of justice in this world, and finds the true judges who are said to give judgment there, Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus, and other sons of God who were righteous in their own life, that pilgrimage will be worth making. What would not a man give if he might converse with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer? Nay, if this be true, let me die again and again. I myself, too, shall have a wonderful interest in there meeting and conversing with Palamedes, and Ajax the son of Telamon, and any other ancient hero who has suffered death through an unjust judgment; and there will be no small pleasure, as I think, in comparing my own sufferings with theirs. Above all, I shall then be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge; as in this world, so also in the next; and I shall find out who is wise, and who pretends to be wise, and is not. What would not a man give, O judges, to be able to examine the leader of the great Trojan expedition; or Odysseus or Sisyphus, or numberless others, men and women too! What infinite delight would there be in conversing with them and asking them questions! In another world they do not put a man to death for asking questions: assuredly not. For besides being happier than we are, they will be immortal, if what is said is true.

From the reading...

“Wherefore, O judges, be of good cheer about death, and know of a certainty, that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death.”

Wherefore, O judges, be of good cheer about death, and know of a certainty, that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. He and his are not neglected by the gods; nor has my own approaching end happened by mere chance. But I see clearly that the time had arrived when it was better for me to die and be released from trouble; wherefore the oracle gave no sign. For which reason, also, I am not angry with my condemners, or with my accusers; they have done me no harm, although they did not mean to do me any good; and for this I may gently blame them.

Still I have a favour to ask of them. When my sons are grown up, I would ask you, O my friends, to punish them; and I would have you trouble them, as I have troubled you, if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue; or if they pretend to be something when they are really nothing,—then reprove them, as I have reproved you, for not caring about that for which they ought to care, and thinking that they are something when they are really nothing. And if you do this, both I and my sons will have received justice at your hands.

The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows.

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Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Related Ideas

Moral Character (<http://plato.stanford.edu/topics/moral-character>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Socrates' influence on the history of Western ethics is traced and discussed.

Psychology as Science of Self (<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/author.htm>). *Classics in the History of Psychology*. Mary Whiton Calkins' series of papers in the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* proposing a psychological approach to the nature of the “self.”

Socrates (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14119a.htm>). *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Entry on Socrates' life and thought from a Catholic point of view.

From the reading...

“... the unexamined life is not worth living...”

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Under Athenian law, one could not be prosecuted for a crime if it could be shown that the action was done unwillingly, under duress, by threat of force, or from ignorance. If Socrates’ view is correct, how could anyone be responsible for his or her actions? If one acts under the influence of passion or other nonrational motives, is one morally responsible? Can one be “willfully ignorant” of the law?
2. The central tenet of the Socratic ethics is “virtue is knowledge.” “Virtue” is to be thought of as *areté* or “the peculiar excellence of a thing.” In other words, just as we say a tool is useful in *virtue* of the way it performs a proper function, so also a person’s virtue is his or her peculiar excellence or proper function. What, then, is the source of the lack of excellence or *areté* in a person? Why is the lack of *areté* considered “bad”?
3. Socrates’ argument that even if he left Athens, he would be driven out of city after city is voiced as a simple constructive dilemma. The major premise is a conditional statement with two different antecedents and two identical consequents (hence, the name “simple”). The minor premiss affirms (hence the name “constructive”) alternatively the antecedents of the major premise. The conclusion affirms the consequent. For example, “If I study at the library, I will learn, and if I study in my room I will learn. But I must study either in the library or in my room. Hence, I will learn.” Is Socrates’ dilemma valid? Check a good logic text in order to evaluate it. Can the dilemma’s conclusion be avoided by taking the dilemma by the horns, by escaping between the horns, or by proposing a counterdilemma?
4. Socrates’ argument that death is a good is phrased as a *reductio ad absurdum* (i.e., an argument often of the form, “If *A* implies *B*, and *B* is absurd, then *A* is absurd”). He couples this argument with the argument by elimination (disjunctive syllogism). A disjunctive syllogism is of the form, “Either *A* or *B* is true, but *A* is not true, so *B* must be true.” Consult a good logic text in order to explain, on Socrates’ view, as it is expressed in these two argument forms, how Hades could not be a bad place. Hint: you must consider the import of the Socratic Paradox.
5. Could an indefinitely extended life have meaning? In economics, value and worth are dependent upon supply; is this true for the length of life, as well?

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6. Fyodor Dostoevsky writes in *Notes From Underground*:

Oh, tell me, who was it first announced, who was it first proclaimed, that man only does nasty things because he does not know his own interests; and that if he were enlightened, if his eyes were opened to his real normal interests, man would at once cease to do nasty things, would at once become good and noble because, being enlightened and understanding his real advantage, he would see his own advantage in the good and nothing else, and we all know that not one man can, consciously, act against his own interests, consequently, so to say, thought necessity, he would begin doing good? Oh, the babe! Oh, the pure innocent child!³

Dostoevsky concludes, “And what if it so happens that a man’s advantage, *sometimes*, not only may, but even must, consist in his desiring in certain cases what is harmful to himself and not advantageous.” Can you construct any specific examples of which Dostoevsky might have in mind?

7. Sigmund Freud regards both Socrates and the Socratic Method so highly that he patterned psychoanalytic theory in part around the methods used in dialogue. Even so, is the Socratic Paradox consistent with the notion of the “unconscious”? Explain whether or not Socrates can admit either the existence of the subconscious⁴ or the unconscious.⁵

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3. Fyodor Dostoevsky. *Notes From Underground*. Trans. Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Random House. 1993.

4. *I.e.*, processes affecting consciousness or personality of which the ego is unaware; or the partially unconscious. *Ed.*

5. *I.e.*, irrational primary processes inaccessible to the conscious mind, discovered only through dreams, amnesias (forgotten events), and slips of the tongue. *Ed.*

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