

The Crito - between public and private discourse

In the *Apology* Socrates seeks to defend his actions as a citizen of Athens - in particular he must justify his pursuit of wisdom as a public profession which has stirred up questions regarding the accepted ways and aims of life. He must address the specific charges of the impiety of “introducing new Gods to the city” and of the corruption of the youths who were influenced by his practice of philosophic questioning.

The trial before a jury of 500 citizens, drawn by lot from those who volunteered to stand as jurymen, gave Socrates a further opportunity to exhort his fellow citizens to the pursuit of truth and virtue, so that what might been a passive defence of his actions becomes an examination of the collective assumptions and aims of the citizens of Athens. He says:

Perhaps, however, someone will say, Are you not ashamed, Socrates, to have applied yourself to a study, through which you are now in danger of being put to death? To this person I shall justly reply, That you do not speak well, O man, if you think that life or death ought to be regarded by the man who is capable of being useful though but in a small degree; and that he ought not to consider this alone when he acts, whether he acts justly, or unjustly, and like a good or a bad man. 28b

He reminds them of the story of Achilles who, warned that if he should revenge his friend's death and kill Hector he would himself shortly thereafter die, gladly chose to act justly and die rather than act the coward, and be a “burden to the earth.” He continues:

I therefore, O Athenians, should have acted in a dire manner, if, when those rulers which you had placed over me had assigned me a rank at [the Battle of] Potidea, at Amphipolis, and at Delium, I should then have remained where they stationed me, like any other person, and should have encountered the danger of death; but that, when Divinity has ordered, as I think and apprehend, that I ought to live philosophizing, and exploring myself and others, I should here through fear of death or any other thing desert my rank. For this would be dire: and then in reality any one might justly bring me to a court of justice, and accuse me of not believing in the Gods, in consequence of not obeying the oracle, fearing death, and thinking myself to be wise when I am not. For to dread death, O Athenians, is nothing else than to appear to be wise, without being so: since it is for a man to appear to know that which he does not know. For no one knows but that death may be to man the greatest of goods; but they dread it, as if they well knew that it is the greatest of evils. And how is it possible that this should not be a most disgraceful ignorance, I mean for a man to suspect that he has a knowledge of that of which he is ignorant? But I, O Athenians, differ perhaps in this from the multitude of men; and if I should say that I am wiser than someone in anything, it would be in this, that not having a sufficient knowledge of the things in Hades, I also think that I have not this knowledge. But I know that to act unjustly, and to be disobedient to one more excellent, whether God or man, is evil and base. I shall never, therefore, fear and avoid things which for all I know may be good, before those evils which I know to be evils. 28a b

We should notice how careful Socrates is to avoid claiming certainty regarding the results of a human being dying - he is speaking to a jury formed from men largely unversed in

philosophic learning, and who rely of the evidence of their senses and the appearance of things. In such circumstances a case is supported by probability rather than certainty, since the effects of death upon the unseen soul - if such exists - are hidden from mortal eyes. Nevertheless he is sure that even in this life the benefits of questioning accepted opinions and ways of life are clear, as is one's alignment with justice:

O best of men, since you are an Athenian, of a city the greatest and the most celebrated for wisdom and strength, are you not ashamed of being attentive to the means of acquiring riches, glory and honour, in great abundance, but to bestow no care nor any consideration upon prudence¹ and truth, nor how your soul may subsist in the most excellent condition?. . . Be well assured then, if you put me to death, being such a man as I say I am, you will not injure me more than yourselves. For neither [my accusers] Melitus nor Anytus injures me; for neither can they. Indeed, I think it is not lawful for a better to be injured by a worse man. He may indeed perhaps condemn me to death, or exile, or disgrace; and he or some other may consider these as mighty evils. I however do not think so; but, in my opinion, it is much more an evil to act as he now acts, who endeavours to put a man to death unjustly. Now, therefore, O Athenians, it is far from my intention to defend myself, (as someone may think,) but I thus speak for your sake, lest in condemning me you should sin against the gift of Divinity. For, if you should put me to death, you will not easily find such another (though the comparison is ridiculous) whom Divinity has united to this city as to a great and generous horse, but sluggish through his magnitude, and requiring to be excited by a gadfly. In like manner Divinity appears to have united such a one as I am to the city, that I might not cease exciting, persuading and reproving each of you, and everywhere sitting among you through the whole day. Such another man, therefore, will not easily arise among you. And if you will be persuaded by me, you will spare me. Perhaps, however, you, being indignant, like those who are awakened from sleep, will slap me, and, being persuaded by Anytus, will inconsiderately put me to death. Should this be the case, you will pass the rest of your time in sleep, unless Divinity should send some other person to take care of you.

Towards the end of his speech, after he has been condemned to death Socrates makes this closing remark:

You, therefore, O my judges, ought to entertain good hopes with respect to death, and to be firmly persuaded of this one thing, that to a good man nothing is evil, neither while living nor when dead, and that his concerns are never neglected by the Gods. . . . But it is now time to depart hence, - for me indeed to die, but for you to live. Which of us however will arrive at a better thing, is profoundly hidden except to Divinity.

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The question of life and death is much more thoroughly considered in the *Phaedo* in a philosophic conversation which Plato requires us to view as a second trial:

¹ Meaning *intellectual prudence*, which is the contemplation of the forms contained in intellect. - Taylor.

Simmias: ...And Cebes appears to me to direct his discourse to you, because you so easily endure to leave us, and those beneficent rulers the Gods, as you yourself confess. 63a

Socrates: You speak justly; for I think you mean that I ought to make my defence as if I was upon my trial.

Simmias: By all means.

Socrates: Be it so then: and I shall endeavour that this my apology may appear more reasonable to you than it did to my judges.

The character of this defence is very different from his first one: Damascius says, "His [second] defence will carry more conviction with his disciples than with the judges, because here he will be able to use *instruction* to convince them, while with the first he had to rely on *persuasion*." And Olympiodorus further points out, "... before the judges, the point under discussion was a particular life, and particular points can be proved only by inquiry; here [in the *Phaedo*], on the contrary, it is life in general" - and the general is more easily referred to principles from which certainty stems. I, 37
2, 16

The *Apology* shows the wise and brave Socrates playing his part in the world - in terms of the scale of virtues as understood by the Platonic tradition, unfolding the political or civic virtues in which the soul reasons as best she can in relation to her non-rational externals. But the *Phaedo* takes us into the internal ordering of the soul herself and the exercise of the cathartic virtues. We can see the change of focus in the following words of Socrates which come at a point at which the reasoning followed by the assembled company seems to have failed:

In the first place, therefore, we should be very careful against admitting an opinion, that no reasoning appears to be valid; but we should much rather think that we are not yet in a healthy condition, and that we ought vigorously and cheerfully to study how to be well. And this indeed ought to be the case with you and others, for the sake of the whole remainder of your life, but with me, for the sake of death itself; as there is danger at the present time, lest I should not behave philosophically, but, like those who are perfectly unskilled, contentiously. For such as these, when they controvert any particular, are not at all concerned how that *truly subsists* about which they dispute; but are alone anxious, that what they have established may *appear* to the persons present to be true. And I seem to myself at present to differ alone in this respect from such as these: for I am not solicitous that my discourse may appear true to those who are present (except just as it may happen in passing), but that it may appear to be so in the most eminent degree to me myself. 90e
91a

During the central part of the dialogue Socrates leads his fellow philosophers through a complex series of proofs of the immortality of the soul and arrives at a conclusion with a degree of certainty far beyond that of the *Apology*. Socrates himself is sufficiently convinced to say,

But it is just, my friends, to think that if the soul is immortal, it requires our care and attention, not only for the present time, in which we say it lives, but likewise with a view to the whole of time: and it will now appear, that he who neglects it must subject himself to a most dreadful danger. For, if death were the liberation of the whole man, it would be an unexpected gain to the wicked to be liberated at the same time 107c

from the body, and from their vices together with their soul: but now, since the soul appears to be immortal, no other flight from evils, and no other safety remains for it, than in becoming the best and most prudent possible. For when the soul arrives at Hades, it will possess nothing but discipline and education, which are said to be of the greatest advantage or detriment to the dead, in the very beginning of their progression thither. For thus it is said: that the daemon² of each person, which was allotted to him while living, endeavours to lead each to a certain place, where it is necessary that all of them, being collected together, after they have been judged, should proceed to Hades, together with their leader, who is ordered to conduct them from hence thither. But there receiving the allotments proper to their condition, and abiding for a necessary time, another leader brings them back hither again, in many and long periods of time

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But how have we travelled from the outer to the inner? From the political to the cathartic? From the appearance to the truth of things? Perhaps the less well-known dialogue, the *Crito*, provides some insights: it sits chronologically between the *Apology* and the *Phaedo* and is a short (11 Stephanus pages) exchange between the imprisoned Socrates and his friend after whom the dialogue is named. The dialogue opens when Socrates awakens to find Crito watching over him: he brings news of the imminent arrival of the ship which will signal the end of the festival which has prevented the Athenian authorities carrying out the execution of the philosopher. Socrates, however, thinks that the ship will be delayed for a little while longer because, he says that in a dream,

“A certain woman, beautiful, of a pleasing aspect and in white raiment, seemed to approach, and calling me to say, The third day hence, O Socrates, you will arrive at the fertile Phthia.”

Adapting a quote from the *Iliad* when Achilles considered returning to his homeland - Thomas Taylor suggests that the homeland of Socrates, the intelligible world, is thus referenced. Crito has a plan to free Socrates from jail - the jailor being open to bribery which Crito can arrange - and to hurry Socrates away to Thessaly where he has friends. He outlines the reasons why this is desirable among which is a need to ensure that Crito's own reputation is not damaged by the suggestion that he has failed to save Socrates from death when he has it within his power. He ends by saying that given the shortness of time before the return of the ship, his plan must be put into immediate action. To this Socrates replies,

My dear Crito, your alacrity is very commendable, if it is attended with a certain rectitude; but if not, by how much the greater it is, by so much is it the more blameable. It is necessary, therefore, to consider whether these things ought to be done or not. For I am a man of that kind, not only now but always, who acts in obedience to that reason which appears to me on mature deliberation to be the best. And the reasons which I have formerly adopted, I am not able now to reject in my present fortune, but they nearly appear to me to be similar: and I venerate and honour the same principles as formerly; so that, unless we have anything better to adduce at present than these, be well assured that I shall not comply with your request, not

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² Or the guardian daemon who guides the soul through the life and death it has chosen before its descent into the earthly body.

though the power of the multitude should endeavour to terrify us like children, by threatening more bonds and deaths, and confiscations of property.

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Consider then: does it not appear to you to have been asserted with sufficient rectitude, that it is not fit to reverence all the opinions of men, but that some should be honoured and others not? Nor yet the opinions of all men, but those of some and not those of others? What do you say? Are not these things well said? 46e
47a

Cri. Well.

Soc. Are not worthy opinions, therefore, to be honoured, but base opinions not?

Cri. They are.

Soc. And are not worthy opinions those of wise men; but base opinions those of the unwise?

Cri. Undoubtedly.

Soc. Come then, let us again consider how things of this kind were asserted. Whether does he who is conversant in gymnastic exercises pay attention to the praise and blame and opinion of every man, or of that one man alone who is a physician, of the preceptor of boys in their bodily exercises? b

Cri. Of that one alone.

Soc. Is it not, therefore, proper that he should fear the blame and embrace the praise of that one, but not the praise and blame of the multitude?

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Come then, if not being persuaded by the opinion of those that are judges, we destroy that which becomes better by health, but is corrupted by disease, can we live after this destruction? But is not this very thing of which we are speaking the body? 47e

Cri. Yes.

Soc. Can we, therefore, live after the body is depraved and corrupted?

Cri. By no means.

Soc. But can we live when that is corrupted which is injured by the unjust, but benefited by the just? Or shall we think that to be less important than the body, whatever it may be, pertaining to us, about which justice and injustice subsist? 48a

Cri. By no means.

Soc. It is, therefore, more important.

Cri. By far.

Soc. We should not, therefore, O best of men, be so very much concerned about what the multitude say of us, but what that one man who knows what is just and unjust, and what truth itself is, asserts respecting us.

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Having dealt with the issue of opinion, Socrates conjures into the conversation the Spirit of the City and the Spirit of the Laws who then proceeds to cross-examine the two men concerning the rightness of the two options which lie before them - escape, or the acceptance of the sentence upon Socrates. Their questioning begins,

Tell us, O Socrates, what is it you intend to do? Do you conceive that by this thing which you attempt, you will destroy anything else than, as far as you are able, us the 50a

Laws, and the whole city? Or does it appear to you to be possible for that city to subsist and not be subverted, in which Justice is not only without strength, but is likewise divested of its authority and corrupted by private persons?

The lengthy exchange with the City and the Laws taking the part normally played by Socrates - the careful questioning and the construction of a rational understanding of the problem laid before the participants of the dialogue - comes down clearly in favour of acceptance and against escape. Socrates concludes his exposition of this imagined conference with these words from the Spirits:

But, O Socrates, being persuaded by us your nurses, neither pay more attention to your children, nor to life, nor to anything else than to justice, that, when you arrive at Hades, you may be able to defend all these particulars to the rulers there. For if, transgressing the laws, you should thus act, it will neither be better, nor more just, nor more holy to yourself, nor to any one of your friends; nor will it be more advantageous to you when you arrive at Hades. But you will depart, if you do depart, not injured by us the Laws, but by men. If however you should so disgracefully escape, returning injury for injury, and evil for evil, transgressing your agreements and compacts with us, and injuring those whom you ought not to injure in the smallest degree, *viz.* yourself, your friends, your country, and us; - in this case, we shall be indignant with you as long as you live; and in another life, our brothers the Laws who reside in Hades will not benevolently receive you; knowing that you attempted, as far as you were able, to destroy us. Let not Crito, therefore, rather than us, persuade you to do what he says.

Be well assured, my dear friend Crito, that I seem to hear these things, just as those who are agitated with Corybantic fury appear to hear the melody of pipes. And the sound of these words, like the humming of bees, in my ears, renders me incapable of hearing anything else. You see then what appears to me at present; and if you should say anything contrary to these things, you will speak in vain. At the same time, if you think that anything more should be done, tell me.

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The embodied soul who speaks in the *Apology* is thus prepared for the *Phaedo*, where Socrates as a soul *itself by itself* is able to play his heroic part in the initiation of the cup.