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English 111, Prompt 1

Socrates: His Philosophy through Death

Plato’s *Apology of Socrates* presents an account of Socrates’ trial and death sentence. Whereas the prosecutors against Socrates wanted to humiliate and be rid of him, Socrates transforms the trial into an explanation of his art of being to Athens, which is to completely and unendingly follow his philosophy. Socrates describes himself as a gadfly, sent by the Gods, to awaken the sleeping horse of Athens (82; 30e) and warns Athens, which has not heeded his teachings, that his death is not an end to his philosophy. Rather, it is merely a continuation of his philosophical practice.

Socrates speaks to the jury about several topics, one of which concerns the notion of knowing what exists after death. He states that no one knows what happens after death, but fears it as the “greatest of all evils.” (80; 29b) He reprimands this thinking as ignorance: fearing death implies that you are certain that death is evil, when there is no evidence to prove that. As an orator who speaks only the truth (64; 18a), he does not fear death.

Instead, he explains his discovery of the Socratic paradox: through questioning persons reputed to be wise, he found that he was considered the “wisest” by the Delphic oracle because he was the only wise man who recognized his ignorance. (70; 21d) From that moment, Socrates explains that since then, he “comes to the god’s aid and show that he [others] are not wise.” (72; 23b) In other words, his realization of the Socratic paradox turned into a way of living, so complete that he has “had no leisure, either to do any of the things of the city worth speaking of or any of the things of my family.” Finally, since he is the wisest man, he concludes that he will obey the god rather than you [humans]: he explains, “as long as I breathe and am able to, I will certainly not stop philosophizing, and I will exhort you and explain this to whomever of you I happen to meet, and I will speak just the sorts of things I am accustomed to.” (81; 29d) He adds to this even further, when he explains that even in death, he will keep philosophizing.

The Athenians valued money, reputation, and honor. Socrates dismisses these values, even accusing Athenians of not feeling shameful for having such base values. He then explains his values, which are true, as “Not from money does virtue come, but from virtue comes money and all of the other good things for human beings.” (81; 30b) This concept of true virtue is that Socrates declares to be what he spreads to others until the end of time, even if he “were going to die many times.” (81; 30c) In response to this statement, the Athenian jury becomes rowdy, either in support for or in protest for Socrates; what we do know from the text is that Socrates does not care either way, requesting them to “not make disturbances at the things I say, but to listen.” (81; 30c) Socrates is clearly not focused on the trial itself, but focused on getting his explanation of his philosophy across to the jury, his fellow Athenians.

Socrates’ life went against Athenian values due to his own values being an inversion of their values. In this sense, he was fated to being in conflict with the Athenian society. He notes at the beginning of the trial that his true enemies in the trial—his true accusers— are the men of Athens who have scattered rumors of him about, some who have been doing so as early as when members of the jury were still children. (65; 18c) They are the reason why Socrates chooses to simply keep doing what he has been doing in his life: practice his philosophy.

By practicing this, he naturally antagonizes the people, explained as becoming “hateful both to him and to many of those present.” (70; 21d) This is the meaning behind his “gadfly” metaphor: Socrates is a bothersome and hated gadfly that needs to rudely awaken the sluggish and sleeping horse that is Athens. (82; 30e) Similarly, Socrates does not dare compromise his philosophy at the trial, even if it means that it will lead to hostility. He even goes as far to explain that “since I am the sort of man that I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves.” (82; 30c) Socrates is not concerned about death, choosing to practice his philosophy over keeping his life. Therefore, when Socrates is given a chance to appeal his death sentence by stating his *timasthai* (to Socrates, this mean “What do I deserve?”), he proposes to be given free meals in the Prytaneum. (91; 36e) Socrates is convinced that he is the only one in Athens who can bring the people to a higher state of truth and wisdom. Unsurprisingly, he sentencing is soon determined to be death.

After his death sentence is set in stone, Socrates has a slight change in the contents of his speech. To the jury members who have voted for his death, he accuses them of trying to break him down to “wailing and lamenting, and doing and saying many other things unworthy of me.” To which he states that “I much prefer to die having made my defense speech in this way than to live in that way.” He establishes his victory over them: they may have been able to seal the end of his earthly life, but his philosophical ideas stand firm. He also provides them with a haunting premonition—his disciples, who are harsher and younger, will continue to refute the ones that refuse to listen to Socrates, and thus the problem that they faced with Socrates will not stop. (94; 39d) In this way, he points out one way that his philosophy will exist even past his death: through his disciples.

When he talks to his supporters, he takes a softer and passive tone, but he reveals notions that have not come up before, especially in terms of what Socrates speculates is after death. First, he states that death may be like a sleep in which there is no dream—a state of ultimate rest. Socrates says that this is at least “a gain.” In this, Socrates reaffirms the point that death is not something to be feared and may be in fact relaxing. It is important to reiterate though, that this is simply a speculation by Socrates, who has already been condemned to death, perhaps trying to soothe his fellow supporters of his destiny. Secondly, he thinks that if death does lead to the afterlife, whether heaven or hell, he would be able to associate with past figures who have come and be able to practice philosophy with them. Socrates states: “For I am willing to die many times if these things are true, since especially for myself spending time there would be wondrous... I would pass my time examining and searching out among those there—just as I do to those here —who among them is wise;-and who supposes he is, but is not.” This is the ultimate evidence of self-consistency in Socrates’ philosophy: he would gladly keep doing the same things he is doing on earth, even in the afterlife, with joy.

On a first look at the *Apology of Socrates*, Socrates seems to have completely failed his defense. He was fated to be put to death, but triumphed in proving his self-consistency. He upholds his role in the trial as Socrates, the orator, who tells the truth, and shows that his values and philosophy are on a wholly new plane of thinking. He trusts himself as telling the truth because his life course has shown it to be true. Before starting his defense, he asks the jury to “tell each other... if any of you ever heard me conversing such things... and from this you will recognize that the same holds also for the other things that the many say about me.” (64; 18a) Seeing that none could prove him wrong, their silence proved that Socrates lived a life around his philosophy.

Socrates shows to his enemies that even death will not stop him. He leaves with a telling phrase: “Which of us goes to a better thing is unclear to everyone except to the god.” (97; 42a) This phrase is rhetorical: It is very clear that Socrates will die as a victor, while the Athenians will be changed by the Socratic Schools by Plato, Phaedo, and his other disciples.

Bibliography

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