

ON REREADING *THE APOLOGY*

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“Yet, I have often seen them [men thought to be virtuous] do this sort of thing when standing trial, men who are thought to be somebody, doing amazing things as if they thought it a terrible thing to die, and as if they were to be immortal if you did not execute them.”
—Plato, *The Apology of Socrates* (35a)

“In my usual way [I will] point out to anyone of you whom I happen to meet: ‘Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?’”
—Plato, *The Apology of Socrates* (29e)

I

Each semester, with a class, I reread *The Apology of Socrates*. It is something I always look forward to. When they read it, I encourage (order!) students to shut off their cell phones, TVs, cool music, and expel roommates. Read it in silence. Learn, with Cicero, what being “less” alone when you are alone means. Each semester *The Apology* is both a familiar and new text. The written dialogue exists almost in spite of us. It is already there before our time. It has survived the ages. It was not lost. It has been present to at least some readers since the century in which it was written, when Plato was a young man.

The Apology is addressed to our souls, not to our polity. It practically calls us by name. On reading it, each of us does instinctively condemn the jury that convicted Socrates, just as he said we would. Yet if we are honest, we suspect that, had we been there, we too would have been among those who voted to kill the philosopher. This defense is more contemporary and pertinent than anything in the daily *Le Monde* or *New York Times*. It is also truer. It asks us, as these do not, to examine our souls, daily, if we want to pursue lives that are worthwhile. On further thought, many of us do not so want to reflect, even though we hate to admit it. We might have to change our ways.

It is, I say, ever a new text. I cited the passage in the beginning of this essay that comes just before the first vote of the trial, about whether Socrates, as charged, was guilty of not believing in the gods of the city and of corrupting the youth. The jury of the city decided he was guilty. The vote was 281–220. Before the vote, Socrates speaks of those who have high principles but, in the face of death, begin to grovel and plead as if they had no principles at all. They just want to stay alive at any cost, even that of truth.

What interested me here was Socrates’ rather witty remark about what happens to those who by such pathetic wheedling and denial of principles do manage to stay alive. Did they not know that they would soon enough die anyhow? Thus, when they came to die the second time, they would have their cowardice and denial of principle on their souls. On these denials, they would be judged. Plato never leaves the issue of the judgment of our acts, even after death, to be doubted. He thinks the world is created in justice for each of us.

Why this particular passage struck me, I think, is because I had just read something Benedict XVI had said in his Homily at the Easter Vigil Mass in St. Peter's. One thing can illuminate another: deeds words, words deeds.

“Modern medical science strives, if not exactly to exclude death, at least to eliminate as many as possible of its causes, to postpone it further and further, to prolong life more and more,” Benedict remarked. “But let us reflect for a moment what would it really be like if we were to succeed, perhaps not in excluding death totally, but in postponing it indefinitely, in reaching an age of several hundred years. Would that be a good thing? Humanity would become extraordinarily old; there would be no more room for youth. Capacity for innovation would die, and endless life would be no paradise, if anything a condemnation.”

Evidently, Socrates, from another angle, was aware of the exact same problem that the pope touched on. Supposing you do manage to stay alive by betraying your principles, country, or friends, just how long will you last in this new condition?

At the end of *The Apology*, Socrates himself, still addressing the jury that condemned him, explains why he is not afraid of death. He did not know whether death was an evil or not. What he did know was that doing something wrong was possible. He also knew what was evil to do. It is never right to do wrong. This sentence alone is the foundation of our civilization, the one that should in fact distinguish all civilizations.

But death, Socrates tells us, is either a lapse into nothingness, in which case it does not make much difference whatever we do. Indeed, in this case, it means that we technically get away with our evil deeds. No punishment will happen even to the worst of human lives.

Or else death is an opening to the immortality of the soul. Socrates expects in that curious state to continue doing what he always did. He would still philosophize to discover what was true. Only now he had to converse with, in addition to the folks on the streets of Athens, the great heroes and gods of whom he knew in his tradition. Philosophy comes alive in conversation, even in immortality.

II

The trial of Socrates seems to have been basically legal in form. No real procedural irregularity is found. In the case of Leon of Salamis, as Socrates himself points out in the same *Apology*, his trial was not according to Athenian law. So Socrates did not go along with it. He “went home.” But this trial of Socrates was in proper form. Who was on trial was Socrates, the philosopher, before the city, the democracy, the best of the existing cities.

We would probably be less struck by the death of Socrates had he been “done in,” like the Roman philosopher Seneca by his tyrannical ruler, Nero. As Tacitus tells us, Nero eliminated just about everyone, from his mother to his relatives to his friends and to a few of his enemies. But in the case of Socrates, we have that haunting feeling that it ought not to have happened in our favorite form of rule, a “democracy.” We have this same feeling with the death of Christ, whose crucifixion under Pontius Pilate Tacitus actually mentions in the same account as he records the doings of Nero in burning Rome.

The question that never fails to come up about ancient philosophical accounts has to do with whether they are “relevant” to us? Have we not somehow developed a political system that obviates the killing of the philosopher? But we do not have to go too far back or too far away to realize that the greatest killings were not exclusively those perpetrated by the Neros of this world, though not a few were.

We would like to think, I suppose, that the greatest crimes are committed by horrid people with obviously deranged philosophic systems. Yet we find that great atrocities are often put into effect by very democratic-sounding people in defining their own laws. Or if a Muslim “terrorist” kills an infidel in a suicide bomb, he is, in his own mind, killing someone who should be killed. If an expensive abortionist kills a baby, he is a servant of the law. We do not “see” these things. We choose to be legally blind.

III

We find, however, some lightsome moments in *The Apology*. In an Athenian trial, the penalty is to be voted on by the same jury that judged the case. In this second vote, Meletus, the poet, the principal accuser of Socrates, an obnoxious young man, proposed the

death penalty. Socrates is free to propose some other appropriate penalty. He could choose exile. He could go to Thebes, a civilized city perhaps, or to Thessaly, where the barbarian kings rule. But in fact, as he knew, neither of these would work. The same thing would happen in Thebes as in Athens. That is, the issue is not just a local Athenian issue. It is permanent in political things. In the uncivilized city, he would have no one to talk to. He could not be what he was, someone to wake up the city to what is most important in living.

Socrates could also, as we see in the second citation above, choose to stop philosophizing, stop seeking the truth by his peculiar dialectical ways. But this alternative would be asking him, in effect, to cease being Socrates. That choice would betray the vocation assigned to him by the Oracle. Socrates was supposed to be Socrates, in Athens, the intellectual city, the city of Sophists and philosophers, of poets and craftsmen, of soldiers and sailors. Socrates himself was a soldier, as he tells us.

But Socrates never lived a public life in Athens. He understood how dangerous truth was. He was aware that a conflict existed between the city and the philosopher, as well as between the poet and the philosopher. The only way for him to remain alive for as long as he did (though that was seventy years) was that he remain a private citizen: “A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time” (32a).

Perhaps no passage in all of Plato is more contrary to our present political and educational system than that passage of Socrates about leading a private life if we wish to “survive.” Death is not the only or perhaps not even the most effective weapon leveled at the truth Socrates pursued. This is why Tocqueville, I think, spoke of public opinion.

We moderns think that we do not kill philosophers. What we rather do is to give them a civic death. We make their thoughts irrelevant. We separate truth and polity. Civil law is our only law. On the basis of this separation, we go forth to improve the world. We have no real idea what this “improvement” means except, perhaps, longer life, no sickness, no death, and everyone “taken care of.” Our politics, as Benedict said, are a form of eschatology, not ethics. We are seeking to solve by science and politics issues which can be solved only by the enterprise that Socrates initiated, the is-

sue of what kind of life do we live, the issue of what is evil that we do both by law and in our souls?

IV

Human wisdom, Socrates thought, was “worth little.” He was not degrading it, only comparing it to what it is that we really exist for. The title of my ISI book *On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs* comes from this (23b) and other similar passages in *The Republic* and *The Laws*. Leo Strauss points out someplace that Socrates is recorded as laughing, but Christ is not. Chesterton says that the reason for the latter is that we could not bear the joy in which we actually exist if we saw it. The gods do not philosophize. They are already wise. We are not wise. We seek wisdom. Where do we look?

Socrates insists that he is not wise. He does not teach. He does not charge a fee. He does not corrupt the youth who hear him. These are the youth he is accused of corrupting. They are the proximate cause of his death. The city fathers of these potential philosophers blame Socrates for undermining their authority, the traditions of the city. The young men listen to Socrates. They try to imitate him. They show off. Socrates calls himself a “gadfly.” His vocation is to wake us up to the things that are for their own sake. He provokes the potential philosophers to listen to him

Nietzsche tells us that this sort of “waking up,” this belief in spirit and good, is what corrupts us. He also tells us that modern philosophy, which seeks its own truth through its systems, has also failed. Nietzsche is left with himself. The cosmos and history have collapsed into his own will. We cannot talk only to ourselves and remain sane. But we can talk. We are the political animals. We can be listeners to *what is*. Our words take us back to reality, to each other. We are restless.

Socrates lived as long as he did because he was in a city that could not tell the difference between the fool and the philosopher. They both, in common opinion, spoke the same nonsense. Nietzsche hated Christianity because he thought that it sought to complete for everyone what Socrates saw could happen only to a few. Christianity universalized weakness and normalcy. Nietzsche thought that democracy and Christianity were from the same cloth. Both lacked nobility.

Nietzsche wanted to reintroduce cruelty as a rational policy because men grow useless without suffering. Nietzsche indirectly reintroduces the Cross on which, as he famously said, the last Christian died. He introduces it as political policy, not atonement. Escape from suffering is the modern this—worldly agenda. It will tolerate no rivals. It is the new divinity. The elimination of poverty is its prophet.

The last words of *The Apology* are these: “Now the hour to part has come. I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one except the god” (42a). When we reread *The Apology* today, such words still ring in our souls. Our polity answers this question by saying clearly: “It is better to live.” We sacrifice many lives to this principle. If we are alive because we have made our own definitions and laws about what is right and what is wrong, we still will confront the recurrent themes of Socrates: “It is never right to do wrong.” “Death is not the worst evil.” A civilization not based in these principles is, in fact, not worth living in. We do not escape ourselves because of our regime, our form of rule. The polity lives by our souls.


The very first words of *The Apology* have always struck me. Socrates and the jury have listened to Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon, his accusers. Socrates marveled at their presentation of the case against him. They almost persuaded him of his own guilt. He then adds, “And yet, hardly anything of what they said is true” (17a). Socrates denies that he is an orator. He denies that he is a teacher. He denies that he is a wise man. We have no reason to think he is here being simply ironical. The young men, the potential philosophers, listen to him. They are still young. They are being called out of themselves.

Yet how difficult it is to listen to Socrates. Would we have been better off had we a video of the Trial of Socrates? I think not. What we have, our quiet reading, is enough to re-present in our souls the issues that are fundamental to our polity: How we live? What is true? What is good? What is it to be wise?

Had Socrates decided that continuing life is better than truth, had he chosen to live a few more years beyond his seventy, we would never have heard of him. The world is full of those who so chose. We hardly want to know of them. We know of Socrates because a democracy killed him in a legal trial. He obeyed its laws. This obedience was the only way open to show them the disorder of

their souls. It is no different today. We just blind ourselves not to see who is killed and who legislates its possibility.

Nietzsche, that philosopher who saw where modernity was leading, is right. If Plato is wrong, he is right. God is dead in our souls. Nothing is left to us but endless life, unless we still read *The Apology* of Socrates. Here we first listen to intimations, to conversations and judgments that transcend our own mortality. The Trial of Socrates needs to be lived again and again. This is what education is about.

We still hear the accusations in which, as Socrates said, “There is no truth.” Thus, we conclude: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” These are not Socratic words. But they are to his point. Much of what we do not hear, we first choose not to hear. Somehow, these words still remind me of the Athenian accusers and jurors who condemned Socrates. 

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