



Apology Plato

Excerpted, cir. 360 BCE

Translated in 2013 by Professor Peter Heinegg
from Union College, Schenectady, NY

In 399 BC, Socrates (an ancient Greek philosopher), was put on trial by his fellow Athenian citizens. The Apology is Plato's account of the speech that Socrates gave in defense of his actions at the trial.

Let me begin by asking what's the charge that has gotten me **slandered** and that gave **P1**
Meletus the confidence to **indict** me as he has. What *did* the people who slandered me
say? I'll have to read their sworn statement, as if they were prosecuting me. It runs
something like this: "Socrates is a criminal and meddles in matters where he has no
5 business. He's always poking under the earth and up in the sky. He makes the worse case
look better; and he teaches this sort of stuff to others." You yourselves have seen
Aristophanes make this claim in his comedy (*The Clouds*), which had a character called
Socrates strolling around and saying, "I walk on air," and spouting all sorts of other
nonsense about which I know absolutely nothing. And I'm not saying that because I look
10 down on that sort of science, if someone actually knows it. I just hope Meletus never
brings charges against me for *that!* But, Athenians, I've never gotten mixed up with that
sort of thing; and I can call most of you here today as my witnesses to this. I ask as many of
you who've ever heard me speaking in public—and lots of you have—whether anyone
ever heard me discussing such things, either briefly or at length.—(*Voices of agreement in*
15 *the audience.*) You see, and so you'll know what to think of the other accusations most



people make against me. None of it's true. And if you've heard anyone say that I set up to be an educator and charge money for it, that's false too. ...

Perhaps somebody here might reply: "But, Socrates, what's wrong with you? Where do these charges come from? Surely, none of this talk and publicity about you would have arisen if you behaved like everyone else. So, tell us what your problem is, because we don't want to treat you unfairly." That sounds fair enough to me, and I'll try to show you what has led people to talk about and accuse me. Listen, please. Some of you may think I'm joking, but you can be sure I'll tell you the whole truth.

Athenians, I got this reputation thanks to a certain kind of wisdom I have. What kind of wisdom, you ask. Just a human sort of wisdom, I'd say; and I may really *be* wise in this respect. Perhaps the people I just mentioned have some type of superhuman wisdom, or something I can't put into words. That's because I just don't understand it; and anyone who says I do is lying and slandering me. ...

And now please quiet down, Athenians, even if I say something that strikes you as over the top; because the statement I'm about to make isn't mine. The person I'm referring to deserves to be trusted. The witness I call on with respect to my wisdom—if it be wisdom—is the god of Delphi (Apollo). You know what sort of man **Chaerephon** was, my companion from early on and a friend to your democracy. He took part in the recent **exile** and returned from exile with you. You certainly know what Chaerephon was like, how **impetuous** he was in everything he set his mind to. Well, he went to Delphi and asked the **oracle**—please don't interrupt—asked the oracle if there was anyone wiser than myself. And the priestess of Apollo replied that there was nobody wiser. Chaerephon has since died; but his brother can testify to all of it.



Why do I bring this up? Because I'm going to show you where the accusations against **P5**
40 me came from. When I heard from Chaerephon, I thought, "What ever does the god mean? What is this riddle all about? I'm not aware of being wise, not a lot and not a little. So what does he mean by calling me the wisest? He can't be telling a lie. That just wouldn't be right." So, with great **toil** and trouble I began to look into what he said.

I paid a visit to one of those people with a reputation for being wise. I thought that **P6**
45 there, if anywhere, I could prove the oracle wrong: "Look, this man is wiser than I am; but you said I was the wisest. I checked this man out—there's no need to give his name; he happened to be one of the politicians. And, after conversing with him, I felt that, although many people and especially this gentleman himself took him to be wise, he wasn't. And then I tried to show him that while he thought he was wise, he was no such
50 thing. But that just turned the man and many of those with him against me. As I walked away, I thought to myself, "At least I'm wiser than *this* fellow. Neither of us actually knows what Beauty and Goodness are, but he *thinks* he knows, even though he doesn't; whereas I neither know nor think I know." Then I went to see someone else reputed to be wiser than the first man; but I came away with the same impression, which made me an object
55 of hatred both to him and many others.

Afterwards I went to talk to one person after another, sensing how **odious** I had **P7**
become to them. I was sad and fearful; but I felt it was necessary to make the god's work my highest priority. So I had to go consult all those with a reputation for knowing anything, and find out what the oracle's answer meant. And **by the dog**, Athenians, I have
60 to tell you the truth. When I went on my godly quest, I discovered that the people with the finest reputation struck me as just about the most lacking in wisdom, whereas others who



were rated lower were actually *more* sensible. ...

Now this investigation has made me a lot of bitter enemies, which led in turn to a lot of slander being spread about me. I've come to be called "the wise man," because the
65 people who listen to me always assume that I know all about the subjects that I show others are ignorant of. But the truth is more likely that the god is the only wise one; and the oracle's response means that human wisdom is worth little or nothing. And it seems that the god isn't talking about Socrates in person; he's just using my name and taking me as an example, as if to say, "O humans, the wisest one among you is somebody like
70 Socrates—he realizes that in fact he's worthless when it comes to wisdom."

That's why I still go around seeking and searching at the god's command for anyone, whether citizen or foreigner, who I think is wise. And in my task of helping the god, if I find anybody who fails this test, I point out that he's not wise. As a result of this
75 assignment I have no leisure time to devote to any of the city's business worth mentioning or to my own private affairs; and I'm completely poverty-stricken because of my service to the god.

In addition, the young men with the most time on their hands—the ones from the upper classes—like to come along with me and listen to people being questioned. These fellows often imitate me and try questioning others. I suspect they find a large
80 supply of folks who think they know something when they actually know little or nothing. And then the people who have been grilled by those youngsters get angry, not at themselves, but at me. "This Socrates," they say, "is the most **abominable** man; and he corrupts the youth." When someone asks how I do that, with what sort of actions or



teaching, they don't have any answer. They don't know; but rather than appear to be

85 stumped, they repeat the handy old **clichés** about philosophers: "things up in the air" and "things beneath the earth," "not believing in the gods" and "making the worse case look better." I imagine, they'd rather not tell the truth, that they've been caught pretending to know something when they know nothing. And because there are a lot of them; and they're extremely concerned about their **prestige**, and they line up and speak **plausibly**

90 about me, they've long since filled your ears with violent slander. Meletus and **Anytus** and **Lycon** have angrily attacked me: Meletus on behalf of the poets, Anytus on behalf of the craftsmen and the politicians, and Lycon on behalf of the orators. What I've told you, Athenians, is the truth. I've concealed nothing; I've **evaded** nothing, big or little. And yet I'm pretty sure that what I've done has made them hate me. That hatred shows that I'm

95 speaking the truth. It's the reason why they've slandered me, as you'll find out whenever you investigate this, now or later. . . .

Now then, Athenians, I'm going to present my defense, not for my own sake, as **P11** one might suppose, but for *your* sake. I mean, so that you don't condemn me and thereby sin against the gift the god gave you. For if you kill me, you'll find it hard to find

100 someone like me, someone who—if I can use a **crude** and ridiculous expression—goes after the city the way a **gadfly** goes after a big thoroughbred horse that's sluggish because of his great size and that needs to be **roused** by stinging. It seems to me that the god has inflicted me on the city in some such fashion: I never stop rousing and persuading and **chiding** every one of you, landing on you everywhere all day long. You're not likely to



105 get another gadfly like me; so take my advice and spare me. You might get vexed, the way
sleepy people do when they're waked up, and you might swat me, if you listen to Anytus,
and easily kill me. Then you'd spend the rest of your lives sleeping, unless the god in his
kindness were to send you someone else like me. I happen to be a gift of the god to the
city; and this is how you can tell: Unlike most people, I have neglected all my own
110 interests, and I've put up with this private neglect for so many years now, while always
attending to *your* business. I've taken each one of you aside, like a father or elder brother,
and encouraged you to have a care for virtue. Now if I had gotten any profit out of this or
been paid for my advice, that would have made sense. But now you yourselves can see
that my accusers, who shamelessly throw every other charge at me, haven't taken their
115 shamelessness so far as to get somebody to testify that I ever charged anyone a fee or
asked for pay. And I think I myself have a witness to the fact that I'm speaking the truth
here: my poverty.

(The jury returns a guilty verdict. Meletus asks for the death penalty.)

There are many reasons, Athenians, why I'm not disturbed by your vote **P12**
120 condemning me. It's what I expected. But I was much more surprised by the
number of votes for and against. I didn't think I'd lose by a narrow margin, but by a much
wider one. Look, if only thirty votes had gone the other way, I would have been **acquitted**.

You may think that by arguing this way, as in my remarks about wailing and **P13**
pleading, I'm just putting up a bold front. That's not true. No, I'm convinced that I
125 never deliberately harmed anyone; but I can't convince you about this, because we've
only had a short time for our discussion. I think that you *would* be convinced if you had a
law, as other places have, requiring death-penalty cases to be judged not in a single day



but over several days. But, as things stand, it's hard to **quash** these slanders in a short time. Anyhow, convinced as I am that I never harmed anyone, I'm not about to harm

130 myself by saying that I deserve anything bad or propose a penalty like that for myself.

What do I have to fear? Am I worried about the penalty Meletus proposes, when I've said that I don't know whether death is a good thing or a bad thing? Should I choose instead something that I'm sure is bad? Should I propose to be sent to prison? But why should I offer to live in a prison, slaving away for whichever magistrates have been elected? Should

135 I propose a fine—and be kept in chains until I pay it? But then my old problem comes up: I don't have any money to pay a fine. Should I propose being sent off into exile?

That punishment might suit you. But I would have to be madly in love with life if I **P14** failed to realize that if you, my fellow citizens, can't endure my arguments and discussions—so bothersome and irritating do you find them that you want to get rid of

140 them for good—then other people wouldn't endure them either. Not a chance. And what a wonderful life I'd lead if I went off, a man of my age, moving from one city to another, only to be driven out. Because I'm well aware that wherever I go, the young people will listen to what I say, as they do here. And if I **antagonize** them, they'll drive me out by persuading their elders to do so. Or if I *don't* antagonize them, their fathers and family **145** members will drive me out on their own.

Some might say, "Socrates, why can't you just go away from here, keep quiet and not **P15** say anything?" This is the hardest thing to get some of you to understand. Because if I tell you that doing that would mean disobeying the god, and so I can't keep quiet, you'll think I'm putting you on, and you won't believe me. And if I say that the best thing for

150 everyone is to spend some time every day talking about virtue and the other things you



hear me discussing and examining myself and others about; if I say that the unexamined life is not worth living, you'll believe me even less. That's how it is, and that's why it's hard to persuade you.

Athenians, you won't save a lot of time by condemning me now. And the people **P16**
155 who want to pour abuse on the city will give you a bad name for killing Socrates, "the wise man." That's because the ones who want to blame you will say that I'm wise, even though I'm not. If you had waited a little while, you would have gotten your wish without lifting a finger. You see how old I am, how far gone in life and how close to death. I'm not saying this to all of you, but to those who voted for my death. And I have another
160 thing to tell them. Perhaps you think I've been convicted for lack of arguments that would have persuaded you—if only I had thought it right to say and do everything possible to win an acquittal. Far from it. I was convicted not by a lack of arguments, but by my lack of ruthlessness and shamelessness and willingness to tell you what you most wanted to hear. You would have found it sweet to hear me groaning and grieving and doing all sorts of
165 things that are beneath me—you know, the kind of things you're used to hearing from others.

But I didn't think then that because I was in danger I ought to do anything **P17**
unworthy of a free person; nor do I now regret defending myself the way I did. I would much rather die for that sort of defense than to live after giving the other sort. For neither
170 in the courtroom nor on the battlefield should I or anyone else **scheme** to escape death any which way. It's often clear in battle that you can avoid death by throwing down your weapons and pleading for mercy from those pursuing you. And there are many other schemes for dodging death amid all sorts of dangers—if you have it in you to do or say



anything at all. It's not hard to escape death; but it's much harder to escape wickedness,
175 because it runs faster than death. Old and slow as I am, I have been caught by the slower
runner, death; while my accusers, who are clever and swift, have been caught by the faster
runner, wickedness. Now I'm going away, found guilty by you and condemned to death,
while they go away—but it's the truth that has found them guilty of evil and injustice. I'll
stand by my sentence; and they'll stand by theirs. Perhaps this is how it has to be. I think
180 it's all right.

And now, for those of you who voted to condemn me, I'd like to make a prophecy. **P18**
I am, in fact, at the place where most people do **prophecy**: the point when they're
about to die. You have killed me; but I have to tell you that you'll be punished immediately
after my death. And the punishment will be a lot harsher than the one you gave by
185 putting me to death. You did that, thinking you'd get off the hook, that you wouldn't have
to **render** an account of the lives you've led. But I'd say that things will work out very
differently for you. There will be *more* people demanding an account of you. You didn't
notice it, but I held them back. And they'll be all the harder on you insofar as they'll be
younger—which will only make you angrier. Because if you think that by killing people
190 you can avoid being taken to task for not living as you should, then you're wrong. That
kind of escape is neither available nor honorable. The easiest and finest escape is not by
doing people in, but by making yourself the best person possible. That's my prophecy to
those of you who have condemned me. And now I bid you farewell.

But for those of you who voted to acquit me, I'd like to say a few words about this **P19**
195 event—while the magistrates are still busy and before I head for where I must die.
Stay a bit longer with me. Nothing prevents us from conversing while we can. You're my



friends, and I want to show you the meaning of what's just happened to me. ***

Let's think this over in another way. Consider how there's every reason to hope **P20**
that death is a good thing. To have died means one of two things: either to be in a
200 state of nothingness and to have no awareness of anything; or else, as they say, it's a kind
of change and migration of the soul from where it is to somewhere else. If there's no
consciousness, as in a sleep where you sleep the whole night through without dreaming,
then death would be a marvelous gain. I think that if someone had to pick a night when
205 he or she slept soundest without even dreaming, and then compared it with all the other
days and nights of his life, that person would have to say: "How many days and nights of
my life have I lived through more sweetly and pleasantly than this one?" I think that not
only an ordinary individual, but the King of Persia himself could find precious few days or
nights like that one. If that's the nature of death, I'd call it a gain, for then all time turns out
to be nothing more than a single night.

210 But if, on the other hand, death is a departure to another place, and what they say **P21**
about it is true, and all the dead are there, then what greater good could there be
than this? For if a person arrives in the underworld, having gotten away from these so-
called judges, and he or she finds there the real judges who are said to preside there—
Minos and **Rhadamanthus** and **Aeacus** and **Triptolemos** and the demigods who lived
215 righteous lives—that would be a splendid journey. And what would you give to get
together with **Orpheus** and **Musaeus** and **Hesiod** and **Homer**? I'd be willing to die many
times over if this is true. And I'd find it marvelous to live there and meet Palamedes or Ajax
the son of Telamon and any other of the ancients who died because of an unjust
judgment—I could compare my troubles with theirs. I think that would be quite



220 pleasurable. Best of all would be to spend my time examining and questioning the people there as I do here to discover who's wise and who thinks he is but isn't. What price would you pay, judges, to question Agamemnon, who led the great army against Troy, or Odysseus or Sisyphus and countless others, men and women? Talking to them, and being with them, examining them—what indescribable happiness. I don't suppose they kill

225 people there for doing that, since everyone is immortal forever afterwards, as well as being happier in other ways than people here, if what they say is true.

But now you, my judges, must take a hopeful view of death and reflect on this one **P22** truth: nothing evil can befall a good person either in life or in death; and the god will not neglect his or her fate. Thus, my case didn't play out by chance. It's clear to me

230 that it's better for me to die now and be free from all my troubles. That's why the special sign that I get from heaven never warned me off in this matter. Now I don't hold it against my accusers and the ones who voted to condemn me. Yet in accusing and condemning me, they *did* mean to injure me; and they're to blame for that. But I beg this of them: when my sons grow up, punish them by getting in their face as I've gotten in yours. If you think

235 they care more about money or anything else than they do about virtue; and if they take themselves to be very important when they aren't, rebuke them for, the way I've **rebuked** you, for not paying attention to what they should and for thinking they're important when they're worthless. If you do that, the treatment you give me and my sons will have been fair.

240 But now it's time to leave, time for me to die and for you to live. But which of us is **P23** headed to a better destiny, nobody knows but God.
