

Plato's *Apology of Socrates*: Philosophy, Religion, and the Gods in the Origins of Liberal Education

Roger Barrus
Hampden-Sydney College

Liberal education is that form education appropriate for a free human being, who is both an individual with his own ends, and a citizen with purposes and responsibilities relating to the society to which he belongs. It aims not so much at acquiring the means useful for human life, as at the attainment of the fullness of that life, what the ancient Greeks called *eudaimonia*, which can be translated as “happiness” or perhaps better as “blessedness.” Liberal education addresses the human yearning for wholeness, overcoming the separation and even antagonism between the two essential spheres of human life (see *Apology* 20b.)

The idea of liberal education in the West can be traced back to Socrates and his student Plato. Socrates in effect invented liberal education when, as Cicero says, he called “philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men and bring her to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil.”¹ There were philosophers before Socrates, but they were not interested in human affairs. Socrates himself began as such a philosopher, seeking “that wisdom, which they call the investigation concerning nature,” to know “the causes of each thing, through what each thing comes to be, and through what it is destroyed, and through what it exists” (*Phaedo* 96a.) At some point, however, he made a change, which he calls his “second sailing” It is this that brought him and his thought into the sphere of human affairs. Since Socrates did not write anything, his new philosophic approach would have disappeared with his death, if it were not for Plato, who wrote his dialogues. In a few dialogues, Plato goes beyond Socrates’ practice of the new approach—his questioning, which he calls his art of dialectic—to its origin, that is, to the transition from his

“pre-Socratic” to his “Socratic” phases. In most cases, what Socrates says is reported through others.

In one case, the *Apology of Socrates*, Plato has Socrates speak directly about his turn.

The dramatic situation of the *Apology* makes it the most comprehensive treatment of the subject. Socrates is on trial before a jury of five hundred Athenian citizens on potentially capital charges relating to his activity as a philosopher. The indictment compels him to do something he has never done before, which is to come before the “multitude” of the city (31c.) He promises to tell the “whole truth” about what he calls his “business” or “affair” (*pragma*, see 20c.) This is no simple task: he must explain his affair—what it is, how he came to it, and how it is beneficial—to people who have no experience with philosophy, and are predisposed to think of it as useless and even pernicious. There is a further complication: the *Apology* is the only dialogue in which Plato—at this time a young man with philosophic potential, as well as poetic talent—is specifically mentioned as being present (see 34a, 38b.) His presence means that Socrates has an obligation to explain his affair even beyond what is required by the indictment against him: Plato’s future, and perhaps even the future of philosophy itself, depends on his giving a theoretically adequate explication and defense of his turn. For these reasons, Socrates must employ a complex rhetoric in his defense speech, not to hide the truth but to make it as intelligible and persuasive as possible to both his audiences. Given what he says about his great age and the likelihood of his dying very soon whatever the court decides (see 17d, 38c), he is perhaps more interested in persuading Plato than the judges. Accordingly, the first issue that Socrates brings up in the *Apology* is rhetoric, comparing his accusers’ and his own (see 17a-18a.)

Socrates' Accusers

The most remarkable feature of his rhetoric is the cavalier way that Socrates treats the charges against him. He begins by mentioning the formal charges by the present accusers, Anytus, Meletus, and Lycon, but only to dismiss them as trivial in comparison with the charges by earlier accusers, nameless except for the comic poet Aristophanes, who parodied him in the *Clouds*. Socrates characterizes the charges of the first accusers as “There is a certain Socrates, a wise man, a thinker on the things aloft, who has also investigated all things under the earth, and makes the weaker argument the stronger,” the problem being that people think that “those who investigate these things do not believe in gods” (18b-c.) Later he adds “teaching the same things to others” and “corrupting the youth” to the charges (19b, 23d.) When asked how he corrupts the youth, he claims that his accusers only say the things that are always “at hand” to say “against all who philosophize: the things aloft and below the earth, and not to believe in gods, and to make the weaker argument the stronger” (23d.) Finally, when he gets around to discussing the present accusers, he says that their charge is “something like this: Socrates does injustice by corrupting the youth and not believing in the gods the city believes in, but other spiritual beings (*daimonia*) that are new (24b-c.)

Socrates thus makes clear that he is really confronted by a number of accusers, and that they make a variety of charges. The accusers, in chronological order, are the many who have an inchoate suspicion towards all philosophers, whose unconventional interests in what is above and below the earth show that they must be up to no good; the so-called first accusers—really Aristophanes in the *Clouds*, who charges Socrates with the offense of pretending to be wise, as a result of his scientific investigations; and the present accusers, who charge Socrates with the crime of subversion, by undermining the beliefs in the gods on which the city is founded. From Socrates’ point of view, the

most substantive accusation is Aristophanes': it deals with what is really important for him, the core of his being as a philosopher. The other accusations concern only the alleged moral and political consequences of his activity. Between the charges of the many—the real “first accusers”—and the present accusers, the former are more significant, because of the danger they present,: Meletus and the rest can not possibly prove their charges against Socrates in the one day allotted for the trial (see 37a-b), so they must be relying on public opinion to convict him.

The one thing that all three accusations have in common is the concern for the belief in gods. The popular prejudice and Meletus' criminal indictment more or less directly charge Socrates with atheism. Aristophanes' charge is more subtle: Socrates' activity leads people to *think* that he is an atheist. The accusations converge in the understanding, which is not questioned by Socrates, that the belief in gods is something essential for the moral decency and political stability of society. It is necessary because conventional morality needs the assistance of a supernatural guarantee to control the passions of the people. A profound unease about the stability of the social and political order is the root cause of a pious fanaticism that Plato illustrates in the *Euthyphro*, a short dialogue that he connects to the *Apology* by having it take place as Socrates is making arrangements for his trial. Euthyphro is registering an indictment against his father, for the accidental death of a slave who had killed another slave. Euthyphro claims that he is only carrying out the will of the gods, citing Zeus' treatment of his father Kronos. Socrates engages Euthyphro in a discussion of the nature of piety, with the evident purpose of dissuading him from his action. He is able to demonstrate to Euthyphro that he does not know what piety is, but that has no effect on him, and he proceeds with his action (*Euthyphro* 3e-4e, 5d-6c.)

Aristophanes and the First Accusers

With three separate groups of accusers, making different charges, Socrates presents a defense speech that is divided into three distinct parts. Given what he says about the substance of the accusations, it is not surprising that he takes up he addresses the first accusers before the present ones. Still, what he does is puzzling: to defend himself against the indictment, he does not need to bring up the earlier accusations at all, and in doing so he complicates his defense, by in effect prejudicing the judges. The explanation for his behavior is that Socrates is not really addressing the judges, but rather Plato. He is defending himself against Aristophanes' charge that he is a boaster, claiming to be wise when he is not. More broadly, he is defending philosophy in what in the *Republic* he calls "the old quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (*Republic* 607b.) Socrates does not dispute the first accusers' other charges: he does not deny that he studies the things above and below the earth, but only that he "understands" anything about them; nor does he deny that he teaches others, but only that he takes money for it (19c, e.) It is not even clear that these really are charges, for Aristophanes: he parodies Socrates' studies and teaching, but he does not condemn them. One thing that Aristophanes does not charge Socrates with is corrupting the youth or anyone else: the characters in the play are corrupt before they ever come to him.

The Socrates of the *Clouds* is a "pre-Socratic" natural philosopher whose main defect is that he is so carried away with his studies that he is oblivious to the effect that he has on the non-philosophers around him, which is to undermine the restraints of the conventional morality, supposedly enforced by the gods. Thus Strepsiades, an old man overwhelmed by debt, takes Socrates' teachings about aerial phenomena to mean that Zeus has been dethroned, so he can safely break his oaths to his creditors (*Clouds* 1233-1241.) Aristophanes portrays Socrates' indifference

to human affairs most forcefully in a scene in which two “speeches,” the “just” and the “unjust,” contend in a kind of political debate for the allegiance of Strepsiades’ son, Pheidippides (*Clouds* 888-1103.) The one speech champions the moderation of the old republican Athens, the other the daring of the new Athenian empire. Both are irrational boasters and slanderers. They are also both corrupt, the main difference between them being that the unjust speech openly embraces the base passions that the just represses out of shame. Socrates, for his part, has so little interest in the proceedings that he simply walks away. In the end, Socrates is punished for his indifference by Strepsiades, who is outraged by the effect of his teachings on Pheidippides, and so urged on by Hermes, the messenger god of Zeus and the other Olympians, he leads a mob against him.

Aristophanes’ point is that, in his indifference to human affairs, Socrates lacks self-consciousness, which means that he cannot be really wise, the first requirement of wisdom being—as the inscription on the temple of Apollo at Delphi enjoins—to “Know Thyself.” The philosopher Socrates the opposite of the poet Aristophanes, whose whole study is human nature, in particular the passions, and thus can legitimately claim to be wise (see *Clouds* 520.) As Aristophanes subtly indicates—by having the Clouds, the ultimate realities for Socrates and the deities that he worships, appear in human form, complete with noses (*Clouds* 342-343)—this problem is not only practical but also theoretical: without reflecting on the nature of his own activity, he runs the risk that his observations and theories will be nothing more than the reflection of his own opinions. Theoretically, self-consciousness is the ultimate proof of wisdom, no account of the whole of reality being complete if it cannot adequately explain the one giving the account.

Socrates appears to have taken to heart Aristophanes’ critique of philosophy. While he admits in the *Phaedo* that he began as a traditional, naturalist philosopher; he does not say, what exactly led

him to change. Judging by Aristophanes' prominence in the *Apology*, it is very likely to be that critique. The recognition that the traditional philosophic approach is insufficiently self-conscious is the beginning of his second sailing. The direct investigation of things can cause what Socrates calls a kind of "blinding" of the intellect, equivalent to the anthropomorphism of the Clouds in the play. The safer approach is to investigate opinions about these things, questioning other people's opinions as a way of elaborating and testing his own. The second sailing is not an abandonment of the ultimate aim of philosophy—knowledge of the whole, including the fundamental realities that define it—but rather the adoption of a more self-conscious means of attaining that end: He defends his new approach by arguing that one who "investigates the things that *are* through speeches is not doing so more through images than the one investigating through things" (*Phaedo* 99d-100a.) Socrates' investigation through speeches—his art of dialectic—is delicate and nuanced. He does not simply debunk the opinions that he investigates, which would lead to nihilism, its own kind of psychic blinding. Socrates treats opinions respectfully, as intimations of reality. His method is to use the principle of contradiction, the self-evident truth that "The same thing cannot act or be acted upon in the same part or in relation to the same thing at the same time, in contrary ways" (*Republic* 4. 436b), to exclude the false in order to allow the true to appear.

Socrates cannot explain all this to the judges, so he tells a story. He prefaces his story—which he tells in response to a hypothetical question: "what is your affair, and where have the prejudices against you arisen from?"—by warning that what he says might sound like a joke (20c, d.) His story is that a friend asked the Delphic oracle if anyone was wiser than Socrates. The question is puzzling, because it implies that he is already doing something that has given him a reputation for wisdom. His story thus cannot be of how he came to philosophy, but rather of a change he made in his

philosophizing. The god answers that no one is wiser, which sets Socrates off on a new course: knowing that he is lacking in wisdom, he takes the god's saying to be a challenge to find someone who really is wise. He therefore questions people who are thought or think themselves to be wise, including statesmen, poets, and artisans. The statesmen turn out to know little or nothing, but do not know that this is the case; the poets do not even understand what they write, but still think themselves wiser than anyone else; finally, the artisans have real knowledge of their arts, but take that to mean that they are "most wise with respect to the most important matters." From all this, Socrates concludes that the god is right after all: he is the wisest, but only in a sort of "human wisdom," that he knows that he does not know (21b-23b.)

The joke in this story is Socrates' claim that he is serving the god by trying to disprove the oracle. The serious point of the joke is that he is fulfilling the Delphic injunction to "know thyself." Wisdom is in essence self-reflective understanding: knowledge that explains simultaneously the observed world and the observer himself. In his questioning—which he says leads to some animosity toward him on the part of those he questions—Socrates is able to test his own opinions against those of others, and thus improve them. More importantly, he is able to test his way of life against others that are reputed to be good for a human being, and proves that it is best. He wonders whether it is better for him to be like others, "neither being a bit wise with respect to their wisdom, nor ignorant with respect to their ignorance, or to have both things they have," and hw answer that "it would profit me to be just as I am" (22e.) His activity leads Socrates to a rational being's highest virtue and greatest good—wisdom—in the form that is appropriate to such a being who is not a god. His wisdom—"I know that I do not know"—is identical to his self-knowledge, which is the mark of his superiority to all other human beings, and demonstrates the superiority of his way of life to theirs.

Meletus and the Present Accusers

From his discussion of the first accusers' charges, Socrates turns to the present accusers'. Given what he says about his present accusers, it might be expected that he would deal with them last. His decision to take up their charges after those of the first accusers has the puzzling effect of putting his response to them at the center of his whole defense speech. Even more puzzling, this is the only part of his defense that he conducts as a dialogue, the method of questions and answers that is his customary form of philosophic investigation. Perhaps a hint as to why he takes this approach can be found in the way that Socrates deals with the present accusers: even though there are three—Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon—he treats Meletus as the first and almost the only one, and he questions only him (compare 23e and 24b; see 19b) The only specific thing he says about the accusers is whom they represent: Meletus the poets, Anytus the artisans and politicians, and Lycon the orators. The significance of his examining the poet appears from something Socrates says during his defense against the first accusers, that "it is not possible to have any of them come up here nor to examine him," so he must make his defense as if "fighting with shadows" (18d.) It is easy to imagine exactly whom he would like to call up and question: Aristophanes himself, who was very much alive at the time of the trial, and almost undoubtedly would have been in the audience.² Socrates cannot call Aristophanes up because he is not among the present accusers, so Socrates does the next best thing: he examines Meletus, as a kind of stand-in for Aristophanes.

In essence, the central part of Socrates' defense speech is his critique of poetry, his rejoinder in the old quarrel between philosophy and poetry. Since he is defending himself against the present accusers, Socrates must in some way address their charges, that he corrupts the youth and does not believe in the city's gods, but other new *daimonia*. These are not Aristophanes' charges, however,

which concern Socrates' claim to wisdom. What he does, therefore, is raise questions that are only tangentially related to Meletus' charges, but are fundamental to Aristophanes'. The first question is, who makes the youth better? He raises this question supposedly to show that Meletus—whose name means “care”—does not really care, and in fact is “joking,” about the matter over which he makes his accusation. Socrates argues that if he knows who corrupts the youth, he must also know who makes them better. He then demands that Meletus name the people who do so, and gets him to agree that they include the judges, the audience, the councilmen, the assemblymen, and indeed everyone in Athens except Socrates alone. Socrates then comments on the absurdity of Meletus' position, comparing the improvement of the young to the training of horses, in which the one—the skilled horse trainer—knows how to make them better, while the many are likely to make them worse (24e-25b.)

While his argument has a surface plausibility, the example Socrates gives shows how it is defective: it is possible to recognize one who is making horses worse, without knowing who is able to make them better. Socrates is able to humiliate Meletus because he does not realize the flaw. Humiliating his accuser is not the real purpose of Socrates' argument, however, which makes an important point, that is perhaps apparent only to Aristophanes, along with Plato. It is not carelessness that makes Meletus agree with Socrates, but rather something about his art: as a poet, his success depends on his acceptance by the public, and he therefore cannot afford to offend it. In particular, he cannot offend its vanity. If he expects to influence the public, he cannot diverge too far in his art from its opinions and tastes. Thus the poet as poet lacks the intellectual independence necessary for the real pursuit of the truth. If the poet does happen to hold unconventional views, he is not able to communicate them through his art, which requires him to echo and even affirm common beliefs.

Further, the poet lacks the practical independence necessary to improve the people morally or politically: all he can do is confirm them in their more or less salutary opinions, as Aristophanes does at the conclusion of the *Clouds*, by having Strepsiades return to the tutelage of the Olympian gods. Whoever does know how to make the youth better—and Socrates seems to deny knowing who this might be (20a-c)—the poet is not likely to be the one.

Socrates' second question—"whether it is better to dwell among good citizens or evil ones?"—bears even less relationship to Meletus' charges than the first. Meletus is so completely befuddled that he cannot even venture an answer, so Socrates has to explain, by a series of questions: "don't the wicked always do some bad thing to those nearest them, but the good some good thing?"; "is there anyone who wishes to be harmed by his associates, rather than be benefitted?"; and finally, "do you bring me here as one corrupting the youth and making them more evil voluntarily, or involuntarily?" With this question, Socrates seems finally to return to the charges at hand, and Meletus replies emphatically, that he does so voluntarily. Socrates then points out that he as an old man knows as well as the young man Meletus that the evil do bad things to those around them. He thus declares, "I am not persuaded by you, Meletus, nor do I think is any other human being," that "I do such a bad thing voluntarily." Socrates then concludes by arguing that if he corrupts the youth—which he denies—then he must do so involuntarily, which means that Meletus should "take me in private to teach and admonish," rather than going to court, where "the law is to bring in those needing punishment, not learning" (25c-26a.)

Beyond the further humiliation of Meletus, this discussion—which is the structural center of Socrates' whole speech, the central part of its central part—has a very serious point to make, relating to the critique of poetry and the demonstration of philosophy's superiority to it. Socrates, through

his examination of common opinions is able to raise radical—in the literal meaning of going to the root of things—questions, which the poet as poet, because of his dependence on and attachment to public opinion, cannot do. This part of Socrates' dialogue with Meletus is a specimen of his dialectical method: he begins with a more or less conventional opinion held by his interlocutor, and then by a process of questioning arrives at its fundamental and thoroughly unconventional implications. In this case, the implications are both moral and political. Socrates' denial that neither he nor anyone else believes the claim that he knows that evil people harm those around them, but nevertheless voluntarily corrupts the youth, is a corollary of the paradoxical proposition that virtue is knowledge (see *Meno* 89c.) This in turn leads to the conclusion that knowledge is the sufficient cause of virtue, and conversely that all vice is the result of ignorance, which does not so much resolve the question of the nature of virtue as pose it in its most radical form. Combined with Socrates' argument that those who do wrong in ignorance do so involuntarily, and that the proper response to such wrong-doing is instruction not punishment, this conclusion raises fundamental questions concerning the system of justice in political society, which is based on punishment, and ultimately concerning the nature of the best regime. Thus Socrates can investigate seriously issues, such as the extreme requirements for the establishment of justice in society, that Aristophanes can only treat comically.³

In the last part of the dialogue Socrates responds to the charge concerning the gods. At this point Meletus is so enraged by his continued humiliation that he cannot answer rationally, when Socrates asks whether the charge is that he believes in gods but not those of the city, and thus is not “altogether godless,” or that he does not “believe in gods at all.” Meletus declares that he does not believe in gods, and that he teaches that “the sun is a stone and the moon earth,” which Socrates

dismisses as confusing him with Anaxagoras. Meletus thus contradicts his own indictment, and allows Socrates to sidestep the charge that is probably the most provocative to the judges: now he does not have to say whether he believes in the gods of the city; all he has to do is show that in some way he believes in gods. Socrates suggests that he believes in the divinity of the sun and the moon, the heavenly gods worshipped by “the other human beings,” but he says nothing about the city’s gods, which implies that he does not believe in them. Socrates points out Meletus’ contradiction and accuses him of making a riddle, testing whether “Socrates the wise will recognize that I am joking and speaking against myself, or will I deceive him and the others who are listening?” He then refutes Meletus’ charge of atheism by asking the crucial question: “does anyone believe there are spiritual affairs (*daimonia pragmata*), but does not believe in spirits (*daimonia*)?” Whether daimons are considered to be gods or the children of gods, in either case Meletus proves by his very indictment that Socrates believes in gods, for “there is no means for you to convince a human being with even a little intellect that it is possible for the same person to believe that there are daimons and divine beings, and at the same time that there are not daimons, nor gods, nor heroes” (26a-28a.)

Socrates here completes the humiliation of Meletus, so much so that he refuses to answer questions, and Socrates has to force him to answer or even answer for him {see 27b.) Once again there is a serious point being made, having to do with the nature of philosophy and poetry. In the oracle story Socrates portrays both activities as “daimonic affairs,” but in different ways. The poets, he says, compose their works not “by wisdom” but by “some nature and being inspired, like the diviners and the oracle-givers,” and like them the poets “say many fine things but know nothing of what they say.” At the same time he found that “on account of their poetry, they thought themselves to be the wisest of human beings concerning other things, with respect to which they were not” (22c.)

This description fits the poet Meletus exactly, in the present discussion. The problem for the poet as poet is that his art does not offer a means for testing his presumed wisdom, beyond the applause of the audience. Poetry is essentially supra- or infra-rational creation, which includes the tales the poets tell of the gods that both reflect and stir the pious fanaticism of people like Euthyphro. The poet as poet lacks both theoretical and practical self-consciousness, the very charge made by Aristophanes against Socrates. Philosophy—at least as Socrates understands it and portrays it in the oracle story—is not a matter of speaking for but service to the god. His questioning might seem impertinent, but in reality it is animated by a kind of piety: proceeding from the premise that opinions contain some intuition of reality, it assumes a certain correspondence between the mind and the world, and thus a certain benignity of the god. In the end, Socrates’ questioning both vindicates the wisdom of the god, and establishes and clarifies the nature of his own human wisdom. Perhaps it goes a bit further: by distinguishing human and divine wisdom, his questioning shows Socrates not only *that* he does not know, but to some extent *what* he does not know, and to that degree allows him to penetrate the mind of the god.

The Popular Prejudice against Philosophy

His defense of his “affair” as the best way of life for a human being leaves open the question of its social utility, so following his dialogue with Meletus, Socrates returns to the account of his way of life, this time to show that it is good for society. His challenge is to neutralize the prejudice of “the many,” which he says will be the real cause of his condemnation, if that is the decision of the court. (28a.) How Socrates proceeds reveals another aspect of his relationship to Aristophanes, and more generally of the relationship of philosophy to poetry: what he has learned about the need for and

character of a rhetoric for addressing the general public.

As he did in his reply to the first accusers, Socrates opens this part of his defense with a hypothetical question: “Are you not ashamed at having followed such a pursuit, from which you now risk dying?” To this question, he says that he will respond with a “just speech” (28b.) The reference to the just speech recalls the debate between the two “speeches” in the *Clouds*. Being compelled to speak before the public for the first time in his life, Socrates apparently accepts Aristophanes’ understanding that it is necessary to address the many in the rhetoric of one or the other of the two speeches—which are really popular moralities—and he chooses the moderate just speech as his model. He presents his version of the just speech as an extension of the story of the oracle, but in reality it is nothing of the sort: it is based on the premise that he has affirmative knowledge of the most important issues, in place of the negative understanding of his “human wisdom”; and it leads to a kind of active participation in public affairs, in place of his private questioning.

Socrates does not preface his just speech, as he did the oracle story, with a warning of its comic character. Rather he goes further and begins it with a joke, comparing himself to no less a figure than Achilles: like the great hero of the Trojan War, who did not consider the threat of death when called on to do justice to Hector for killing Patroclus, he will not consider the threat of death for refusing to disobey the god’s “order” to “live philosophizing and examining myself and others” (28b-29a.) The comparison is both broad slapstick and subtle satire. On one level, it is laughably absurd for the old, short, homely, plebeian Socrates to compare himself to the young, tall, handsome demigod Achilles. On a deeper level, it is significant that Socrates changes both Achilles’ story and his own, in order to make the comparison at all. In the *Iliad*, Achilles does not calmly face death in order to kill Hector: from the beginning he fears death and rages that he, the son of a goddess, must sometime

die. He even decides at one point to leave Troy and return home to enjoy a long but inglorious life. It is only when he is even more enraged by the death of his friend Patroclus, and is ashamed and angry at himself for indirectly causing it, that he forgets his original fear and anger and returns to the battle. Similarly, in his story of the oracle, Socrates does not say that he was ordered by the god to philosophize, and then went out to do what he was told. He says rather the opposite: he questioned the declaration of the god, that no one was wiser than he, so he questioned people to find one who was wiser, and ended up vindicating the god. The complex comedy of Socrates' just speech sets the tone for the speech as a whole.

Just as in Aristophanes' just speech, so in Socrates' version shame is the operative moral principle. He argues that while he does not know whether death is a bad thing, he knows that it is definitely "wrong and shameful" to "do injustice and disobey one's better, whether god or man" (29b.) He therefore refuses to "stop philosophizing and exhorting you." saying in his accustomed way, "are you not ashamed to care more for having as much wealth as possible, and for reputation and honor, than for prudence, and truth, and how your soul will be the best possible?" (29d-e) He goes further and claims that he goes "around doing nothing" but telling "both young and old" that "virtue does not come from money, but from virtue come money and all other good things for human beings both in private and in public." In this way, "no greater good has come to pass in the city than my service to the god" (30a-b.) Then, employing an image that he calls "laughable," he compares himself to a gadfly sent by the god to sting the city, like a great sleepy horse, into wakefulness (30e.) He concludes by declaring that he is a "gift given by the god," devoting himself only to the god's work. He offers as proof his great poverty, and points out that his accusers have not been "so utterly shameless" as to produce a witness claiming that he "ever took any money, or asked for it" for his

efforts (31b-c.)

His claim that he does nothing but buttonhole people and exhort them to be virtuous is apparently so extravagant that Socrates has to add something of an appendix to his just speech, in which he explains why he “has never come before the assembly to counsel the city.” He says the reason is that “beginning from childhood” he has had “something divine and spiritual (*theion te kai daimonion*)” come to him, “a kind of voice” that when it comes always restrains him from doing what he is intending. In particular his daimon has always opposed his getting involved in politics, which he claims is “altogether fine,” since if he had done so, he would have been killed long before, and would have been of no use to anyone. Socrates argues that “there is no one who will save himself if he nobly opposes you or any other multitude and prevents many unjust and illegal things from happening in the city,” and therefore “it is necessary for one really fighting for justice, if he wishes to save himself for even a short time, to live a private not a public life” (31c-32a.) He thus remains a private citizen, offering himself “to both rich and poor to question” and then allowing “anyone wishing to answer” to hear what he has to say in response (33b.) Socrates then concludes by refusing to bring forth his family to plead for his life, which would be a “shameful thing” to do for anyone like him, with a reputation for wisdom, courage, or any other virtue (34d-35a.) In addition, such pleading would be unjust because it would amount to an attempt to get the judges to break their oath “to do justice according to the laws,” and would be “neither noble nor just nor pious” (35c-d.)

The story Socrates tells about his daimon is no more an extension of the just speech than the just speech is an extension of the oracle story. In reality, the story of the daimon subtly corrects the just speech, by retracting most but not quite all of what he says in it. His daimon is apparently a

preternatural sense of the dangers involved in his activities as a philosopher, a sense not shared by others, including Anaxagoras, who was accused of impiety and exiled from Athens. The daimon's influence—to hold him back from actions that might harm him or even get him killed—clearly implies that death is a bad thing. That contradicts what he previously said about his ignorance concerning death, which was the reason he gave for disregarding the danger involved in his service to the god. Similarly, his description of his life as a philosopher—questioning and being questioned by those who come to him—contradicts what he previously said about his public preaching and exhorting. The only clear point of consistency between the just speech and what follows it is the emphasis on shame with which he begins the one and concludes the other. Even in this, he makes a significant change: instead of being ashamed to show fear in the face of death, the great unknown, he is ashamed of something very concrete, doing anything that would derogate from his reputation for virtue, and perhaps more importantly, from the practice of virtue by anyone else.

In this way, Socrates reveals the truth of the just speech concealed within its comedy, represented by the decline of the images he applies to himself, from a hero like Achilles to a fly, coupled with the increasingly outlandish claims that he makes on his own behalf, from humble soldier to divine gift. The truth is not what he claims about his activity: if he had engaged in such preaching, he would have gained a reputation as a busybody and crank—like Euthyphro (see *Euthyphro* 2b-c.)—rather than a wise man. The serious part is what he says about shaming people who care more for the extrinsic goods of wealth and power than for the intrinsic goods of truth and wisdom, and his declaration that he is a gift from the god. Those who pursue wealth and power—and that is most human beings—show themselves to be fundamentally needy and dependent, regardless of their social status, and they are put to shame by Socrates' noble self-sufficiency, demonstrated

ironically by his great poverty. He is a gift from the god because in a society dominated by the concern for the means of life, with little or no assistance—and then only in the form of criticism, first and foremost from Aristophanes—he is able to discern the true end of life for a human being. He can therefore stand as an image of the end for others not so blessed themselves, which explains his concern for his reputation as a wise man. Socrates has his daimon, a kind of intermediary or messenger from the god. The deeper truth about Socrates is that he himself is a kind of daimon. Socrates’ “turn” begins with a problem for philosophy concerning the human belief in gods, and ends with the philosopher as the human link to the divine.

Socrates in his defense speech comes close but does not quite convince the five hundred judges: he is found guilty by a small majority, and then condemned to death. The verdict frees him to speak almost the unvarnished truth about his situation: explaining why he cannot just stop what he is doing, he declares, “If I say that this is to disobey the god, and on account of this I am not able to keep quiet, you will not be persuaded by me, on the ground that I am being ironic; and again if I say that this happens to be the greatest good for a human being, to make speeches every day concerning virtue and the other things concerning which you hear me conversing, and examining myself and others—and the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being—still less you will you be persuaded by me saying these things” (37e-38a.) Socrates does persuade Plato, who offers to guarantee the payment of a fine for him (38b.) Perhaps contemplating Socrates’ fate, however, Plato decides more must be done to protect philosophy from the popular prejudice. Utilizing his poetic talent, he writes the dialogues, which present a compelling portrait of Socrates as a new kind of hero—very different from Achilles—and thus establish philosophy as an integral element of Western culture. The dialogues are Socrates’ liberal education in action, both in what they portray, and in

their effect on readers.

¹ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, translated by J. E. King (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press: 1971) V. 4, p. 435.

² Aristophanes died in c. 386 BCE; Socrates' trial occurred in 399 BCE.

³ Compare Socrates' treatment of the issue of the equality of the sexes in *Republic* 5. 51c-462d, with that of Aristophanes in the *Ecclesisuzae*.