

The Apology: A Defense of Philosophy

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The *Apology*, a mistranslation of apologia, Greek for "defense," is a transcript of the defense Socrates presented at his trial on charges of "denying the gods" and, more seriously, "corrupting the youth of Athens." As Socrates pointed out, however, his real crimes were unpopularity and making enemies of the wrong people. Since his practice of philosophy led to the charges against him, Socrates sought to prove his innocence by demonstrating that philosophy is a right and worthwhile pursuit. He made concise arguments to support his claim that he did not corrupt the youth of Athens, and let his accusers know that he did not fear death. This tutorial examines The Apology in four parts:

1. [The Apology](#)
2. [Socrates Argued That He Did Not Corrupt the Youth](#)
3. [The Unexamined Life Is Not Worth Living](#)
4. [Death Is Nothing or Something](#)

1. The *Apology*

The *Apology* takes the form of a long, complex dialogue. It is Plato's account of the defense Socrates' presented at his trial. Remember, Socrates produced no written work. Most accounts of his life and philosophy were recorded by Plato.

The *Apology* begins after the prosecution presented its case, as Socrates offered his defense. He started by distinguishing between the "old charges" and the "new charges." By "new charges," he meant the official charges: denying the gods and corrupting the youth of Athens. But what were the "old charges?"

To grasp their significance, understand that Athens, at that time, was a direct democracy with no constitution. This resulted in mob rule, or rule by the bottom 51%. If someone was sufficiently unpopular, an enemy could make up charges against him and demand a court hearing. This is what happened to Socrates. The "old charges" were, collectively, an attack on his reputation as a philosopher, teacher, and honorable man.

Socrates' unpopularity, for the most part, was the result of a peculiar occurrence. One of his friends was told by the Oracle of Delphi, who was believed to speak for Apollo, that there was no one wiser than Socrates.

Socrates was puzzled by this message. He had always thought of himself as being without wisdom. He asked the philosopher's question—why?—and worked to decipher the Oracle's proclamation. He began by attempting to discover why three groups that were thought to be wise—the poets, the politicians, and the craftsmen—weren't, according to the Oracle, wiser than Socrates.

Socrates found the poets to be unwise because, although they created beautiful poems, they relied on others to interpret and provide meaning (poetry was composed differently at that time). As to the politicians, consider who would be elected in a direct democracy with no constitution. Those who could sway the mob to support them would win. Most successful politicians were members of a group of private tutors called *sophists*, who taught rhetoric. The goal of rhetoric is persuasion, not the attainment of truth. Socrates believed that winning at any cost, without regard for truth, was unwise and immoral. He made enemies of the sophists when he revealed that they would say anything to gain political power. The sophists turned the masses against Socrates and originated the charges against him.

The artisans—the remaining group that was thought to be wise, but wasn't—regularly made a particular mistake. They believed that their expertise within their fields of endeavor made them experts in other fields. Anyone who has been condescended to by an I.T. expert, or who has watched an actor lecture about economics, knows why Socrates found this group to be unwise.

Upon completing his investigation of the three groups, Socrates discovered why the Oracle declared that he was wise: It was because he knew that he was not wise. He knew what he did not know, a concept that is now called Socratic Wisdom. Socrates solved the Oracle's puzzle but, in doing so, made many influential enemies.



DID YOU KNOW

Another source of Socrates' reputation is *The Clouds*—a play by the comedic playwright Aristophanes. It portrays an over-the-top (fictitious) school of philosophy, led by a comedic, highly-exaggerated Socrates.

2. Socrates Argued That He Did Not Corrupt the Youth

After explaining why he had been charged (and was being tried), Socrates focused on the new charges: denying the gods and corrupting the youth of Athens. After indicating why anyone who cares about ethics and wisdom (and oracles) pays homage to the divine, he addressed the charge of corrupting the youth of Athens. Socrates raised two arguments against the charge, directing a dialectic against the chief prosecutor, Meletus.

In the course of his arguments with Meletus, Socrates proves that he did not corrupt the youth of Athens. Unfortunately, the jury did not agree. We will examine Socrates' arguments in detail in a subsequent tutorial.

3. The Unexamined Life Is Not Worth Living

Socrates failed to persuade the jury, which found him guilty. Meletus asked for a penalty of death; Socrates did not suggest an alternative. As a result, he was sentenced to die. However, both before and after his sentence was pronounced, Socrates presented compelling reasons why he did not fear death.

Most importantly, he had done what he thought was right: he had pursued wisdom and taught others to do so; he had lived according to the moral principles of his philosophy. Socrates stated, “The difficulty, my friends, is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness; for that runs faster than death.” He maintained that a good person does what he or she knows to be right, regardless of personal consequences.

The possibility that he might be executed should not influence his determination of what he ought to do. Socrates believed that he, and everyone, should perform the “godly” pursuit of philosophy, of seeking wisdom and right living. This kind of life can only be lived by humans, but without it, we fall short of humanity. As Socrates famously said, “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

4. Death Is Nothing or Something

Determined to do what he knew was right, Socrates made a final, **deductive**, either-or argument to show why we should not fear death:

Death is either nothing or something.

If it is nothing, it is akin to a long, dreamless sleep (which is nothing to fear).

If it is something, then it is a transmigration in which one can converse with those who have died (which is nothing to fear.)

Therefore, either way, death is nothing to fear.

Some have noted that, in maintaining the third premise, Socrates ignored the possibility of a negative afterlife (e.g., hell). However, concepts of eternal damnation were not hypothesized until centuries after his death. Additionally (and more importantly), it was then believed that the afterlife would be ruled by true judges, who would not fault or punish him for having dedicated his life to the pursuit of wisdom and moral philosophy. If we agree with Socrates that everyone should pursue wisdom, the third premise is appropriate.



TERM TO KNOW

Deductive Argument

A type of argument in which the inferential claim is a claim of logical certainty



SUMMARY

In the ***Apology***, Socrates defends himself from the charges that have been made against him and, in so doing, defends philosophy. In pursuing truth—a pursuit that led to the discovery of Socratic Wisdom—he made enemies of the sophists, who condemned him. He refuted the charge of **corrupting the youth**

with two good arguments but was sentenced to **death**. However, the sentence did not upset Socrates, because he knew that he had lived rightly.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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A type of argument in which the inferential claim is a claim of logical certainty