

The defence of Socrates

Background

The trial of Socrates (399 BC) was held to determine the philosopher's guilt of two charges: asebeia (impiety) against the pantheon of Athens, and corruption of the youth of the city-state; the accusers cited two impious acts by Socrates: "failing to acknowledge the gods that the city acknowledges" and "introducing new deities".

The death sentence of Socrates was the legal consequence of asking politico-philosophic questions of his students, which resulted in the two accusations of moral corruption and impiety. At trial, the majority of the dikasts (male-citizen jurors chosen by lot) voted to convict him of the two charges; then, consistent with common legal practice, voted to determine his punishment, and agreed to a sentence of death to be executed by Socrates's drinking a poisonous beverage of hemlock. The account of the trial is from Plato, and Socrates cross-examination of Meletus is still an often cited example of great cross examination technique.

Socrates:

Now I will try and defend myself against Meletus, that good and patriotic man, as he calls himself, and my later accusers. Let us take their deposition, just as if they were a new set of accusers. It runs in this manner: Socrates is an evil-doer, who corrupts the youth, and who does not believe in the gods whom the city believes in, but in other new divinities.' That is the charge : let us examine each point of it separately. Meletus says that I am an evil-doer for corrupting the youth : but I say, Athenians, that he is an evil-doer, for he is playing a solemn jest by bringing men lightly to trial, and pretending to have a great zeal and interest in matters on which he has never spent a thought. And now I will try to show you that it is so.

Come here, Meletus. Is it not a fact that you hold it of great consequence that the younger men should be as excellent as possible?

Meletus: It is.

Socrates: Come then: tell the Court, who is it who improves them? Of course you know, seeing that you have thought about the matter. You have discovered their corrupter, as you say, and therefore you accuse me and bring me to trial. Come now, inform the Court who improves the youth. You see, Meletus, you have nothing to say; you are silent. But don't you think that this is a scandalous thing? Is not your silence conclusive proof of what I say, that you have never spent a thought on the matter? Come, tell us, my good sir, who makes the young men better citizens?

Meletus: The laws.

Socrates: My excellent sir, that is not my question. What man improves them, who first has himself knowledge of the laws?

Meletus: The judges here, Socrates.

Socrates: What do you mean, Meletus? Can they educate the young and improve them?

Meletus: Certainly.

Socrates: All of them? or only some of them?

Meletus: All of them.

Socrates: By the Gods, that is good news! There is a great abundance of benefactors. But now, do the listeners here improve them or not?

Meletus: They do.

Socrates: But do the senators?

Meletus: Yes.

Socrates: Well then, Meletus; the members of the assembly, do they corrupt the younger men? or do they again all improve them?

Meletus: They do so too.

Socrates: Then all the Athenians apparently make the young perfect except me, and I alone corrupt them. Is this your meaning?

Meletus: Most certainly; that is my meaning.

Socrates: It is a great misfortune of mine that you have discovered. Now tell me: do you think that the case is the same with horses? Does one man do them harm, and every one else improve them? On the contrary, cannot only one man, or very few, improve them, namely those who are skilled in horses; while the majority of men harm horses, if they have to do with them, and use them? Is it not so, Meletus, both with horses and with every other animal? Of course it is, whether you and Anytus say yes, or no. And certainly it would be a great piece of fortune for the youth if only one man corrupted them, and every one else did them good. The truth is, Meletus, you show conclusively that you have never thought of the youth at all: you prove clearly that you are quite careless in the matter for which you are prosecuting me.

Now, please tell us, Meletus, can one live better among good citizens, or bad ones? Answer, my friend: my question is not at all difficult. Do not bad citizens always do harm to their neighbours, and good citizens good?

Meletus: Certainly.

Socrates: Would any man rather be injured than benefited by his companions? Answer, my good sir: you are bound by law to answer. Does any one like to be harmed?

Meletus: Certainly not.

Socrates: Well then: when you prosecute me, do you mean that I corrupt the youth and make them worse men intentionally or unintentionally?

Meletus: I mean intentionally.

Socrates: What, Meletus? Then are you so much wiser than I am, though you are so much younger? Do you see that the bad citizens always do evil, and the good citizens good to those with whom they come in contact; while I am so strangely stupid as not to know that if I make any of my companions a rogue he will probably injure me? And then you say that I commit this crime intentionally! You will not make me believe that, Meletus, nor any other man either, I should think. Either I do not corrupt the young at all, or if I do, I do so unintentionally: so your statement is false on both points. If I corrupt them unintentionally, the law does not tell you to bring a man hither for involuntary offences like that: you should take me aside and admonish and instruct me: for of course I shall cease from doing wrong which IS involuntary if I know it to be wrong. But you declined to instruct me: you would have nothing to do with me: you bring me here instead, where it is the law to bring persons who need not instruction but punishment.

The truth is, Athenians, as I said, it is quite clear that Meletus has never paid the least attention to these matters. However, now tell us, Meletus, how do you say that I corrupt the younger men? Clearly, according to your indictment, by teaching them not to acknowledge the gods whom the city acknowledges, but other new divinities instead. You mean that I corrupt the youth by that teaching, do you not?

Meletus: Yes; most certainly: I mean that.

Socrates: Then, in the name of these gods of whom we are speaking explain yourself rather more clearly to me, and to the Court. I cannot understand your charge. Do you mean that I teach young men to acknowledge some gods, though not those of the city? Is that your charge, that I am a setter forth of new gods? If so, I myself believe in the existence of some gods, and my crime is not that of absolute atheism. Or do you mean that I do not believe in gods at all myself, and that I teach others not to believe in them either?

Meletus: I mean that you do not believe in gods in any way whatever.

Socrates: Wonderful Meletus! why do you say that? Do you mean that I believe neither the sun nor the moon to be gods, like other men ?

Meletus: I swear he does not, judges: he says that the sun is a stone, and the moon earth.

Socrates: My dear Meletus, do you think that you are accusing Anaxagoras? You must have a poor opinion of the judges if you think them so unlearned as not to know that the works of Anaxagoras of Clazomenae are full of these doctrines. And so young men learn these things from me, when they can often buy places in the theatre for a drachma at most, and laugh at Socrates, if he pretends to be the author of these doctrines which are so peculiar. But, please tell me, do you really think that I do not believe in the existence of the gods?

Meletus: Most certainly I do. You have no belief at all.

Socrates: No one believes that Meletus, and you know it to be a lie, I think. It seems to me, Athenians, that Meletus is a very insolent and wanton man, and that he brings this indictment simply in the insolence and wantonness of youth. He is like a man asking a riddle that has no answer: Will this wise Socrates see that I am jesting and contradicting myself? or shall I deceive him and every one who hears me? He appears to me to contradict himself in his indictment: it is as though he were to say, ' Socrates is a wicked man who believes in the gods and does not believe in the gods.' But that is mere fooling.

Now, my friends, let us see why I think that this is his meaning. Do you answer us, Meletus: and do you, Athenians, remember the request which I made at starting, not to interrupt me if I speak in my accustomed manner.

Is there any man, Meletus, who believes in the existence of human things and not in the existence of men? Make him give a plain answer to the question, my friends, without these interruptions. Is there any man who believes in the existence of the things of horses, and not in the existence of horses? or in flute- playing, and not in flute-players? There is not, my excellent sir. If you refuse to answer, I will tell both you and the Court that. But you must answer my next question. Is there any man who believes in divine agencies and not in divinities?

Meletus: There is not.

Socrates: How glad I am that the Court has got you to answer by main force. Well then, you say that I believe in divine agencies, whether they be old or new ones, and teach others to believe in them: at any rate I believe in divine agencies according to your statement. That you state on oath in your deposition. But if I believe in divine agencies, I suppose it follows necessarily that I believe in divinities. Is it not so? It is. I put you down as granting it, as you do not answer. But do we not hold that divinities are either gods themselves, or the children of the gods? Do you grant this?

Meletus: Certainly.

Socrates: Well then, you admit that I believe in divinities: now if these divinities are gods, then, as I say, you are jesting and asking a riddle, and affirming that I do not believe in the gods, though I do believe in them. But if these divinities are the illegitimate children of the gods, either by the nymphs or by other mothers, as they are said to be, then what man would believe in the existence of the children of the gods, and not in the existence of the gods? That would be as strange as if a man were to believe in the existence of the offspring of horses and asses, without believing in the existence of horses and asses.

You must have indicted me in this manner, Meletus, either to test my skill, or because you did not know what misdeed to accuse me of truly. But you will never contrive to persuade any one, even of the smallest understanding, that a man can believe in divine things, and things of the gods, and yet not believe in divinities, and in the gods and in heroes.

But in truth, Athenians, I think I need not say much to show that I do not do the wrong which Meletus indicts me for. What I have said is enough for that. But rest assured that I told the truth when I said that I have gained much hatred from many men.

And that is what will destroy me, if I am destroyed: not Meletus nor Anytus either, but the prejudice and jealousy of the multitude. They have destroyed many other good men before this, and I think that they will do so again. There is no fear that I shall be the last. Perhaps some one will say: 'Are you not ashamed, Socrates, of following pursuits, which are likely now to cause your death?' I should make him a just reply, and say: My friend, you do not speak well, if you think that a man of any worth at all should give any weight to the chances of life and death, and that he ought in his actions to regard anything but the question whether he is acting rightly or wrongly, and as a good or a bad man would act.