

Faculty panel on Plato's *The Apology of Socrates*

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Moderator: Kendall Sharp

Christopher Faraone: Hi and welcome. I thought I would talk this afternoon more about how one teaches the *Apology* in different contexts. Danielle [Allen] mentioned the fact that we teach the *Apology* in a lot of different courses. Herman [Sinaiko], for example, has taught it for a number of years in the "Human Being and Citizen" undergraduate core. I've taught it for the last seven or eight years in "Greek Thought and Literature," which is another more historically oriented core. I've also taught it to students twice now in our program overseas in Athens, which is another environment. One of the ways that I like to teach it, particularly because I tend to approach it in the two courses that I teach it in more historically, is I try to give the students a sense of how Socrates appeared to his contemporaries and how he appears to us. We use the euphemism "their Socrates and our Socrates" because the *Apology* has become an enormously important text that really has transcended as history and by letting them know that Socrates could be interpreted quite differently in his own day than he is now frees Socrates as an object of thought for them to continue to interpret him differently. This is a way to liberate the student, give him or her the sense of the tradition, but also open a door to see Socrates, the quasi-historical or legendary figure, so that Socrates has a future with them.

I also set up Socrates in "Greek Thought and Literature," and the way we teach it nowadays the *Apology* is that is the last text that the students read. I try to link it with two texts--the *Iliad*, which Socrates mentions Achilles as a kind of a model for him in this text and I also link it very closely with the *Antigone*, which is a figure that Socrates doesn't mention. There are similar individuals (those of you who have been in the core here, I'm sure you've read all three and you can see where I'm going with this), and [there is] this idea that an individual comes into a confrontation with an authority or with a set

of laws and has to make a stand. When we do it in "Greek Thought and Literature," the students always read at least one and usually two Platonic dialogues before we get here so they have a sense of what Socrates is doing before we get Socrates's self-description. We also tend to read the *Clouds*, the comedy that Socrates eludes to in this speech, (one of the comedies that criticized him some 20 years earlier as being some kind of a nut who did natural science and was indistinguishable from the sophists because he was chattering all the time and playing word games).

What's interesting about doing it this way is, when we do the *Antigone* the students argue a lot. It is very interesting to see how. Antigone is a great figure to get students to argue about. Usually the women take the Antigone side and the men take the Creon side--it's highly gendered and it's always a lot of fun. I try to get them to realize that the unflattering view of Antigone is probably closer to the view of Sophocles' contemporaries. I always have people who argue to the very end and never are convinced by this. But I say that doesn't stop us from taking Antigone and seeing her as a model of a different kind of heroism, and certainly that play and Antigone as a figure of your imagination, gets taken up by the Western European tradition and continues to this day. My mother's family is modern Greek and we have lots of family in Athens. During the military junta, the *Antigone* was the most performed play in Athens, because the military junta couldn't ban it because it was classical Greek and they were trying to claim that their roots went back to Pericles. It got to the point that the university where my mother's cousin Maria went to had a budget for nine or ten plays and they just did the *Antigone*, the *Antigone*, the *Antigone* [and so on] as a wonderful form of protest. [Laughter.] So Antigone for us is this living figure of protests against a kind of human short-sided laws, appealing to some kind of unwritten law, appealing some kind of ideal of right and wrong.

What is interesting about approaching Socrates in light of Antigone is his dealing with the law. One of the dialogues that I read in anticipation of this speech is the *Crito*, because there it is very clear that Socrates is very much unlike Antigone. When we read

Socrates after *Antigone* we soon become aware that they're not the same at all, even though in our modern tradition we tend to treat them in very similar ways. But Socrates says in the *Crito* that I can't leave Athens because this is the city that raised me and this is the city that fostered me and I made a contract. He used the language of contract. He says, when I agree to become a citizen of this city, I entered into a deal that I would follow the laws. And if the end result of my life in interaction with this city is going to be my death, then I accept that.

The last thing I want to say is that if you extend this idea of "our Socrates," the contemporary interpretation, and "their Socrates," it also helps get at this deep-seated problem in the interpretation of this dialogue. There are really two ways to take it. One way, the most common way, is to take it as a highly ironic literary product that Plato is writing after the death of Socrates. And it is an apology--it is a defense of Socrates--but it is really a defense of his whole life. It is a defense of his method and that is why it is very wonderful because in the middle of this supposed speech, he starts interrogating the prosecutor, Meletus. He asks him questions and it sounds just like a dialogue.

In fact, Herman [Sinaiko] has referred to the *Apology* twice in remarks as if it were as a dialogue. It is not in fact a dialogue. It is collected in modern editions under Plato's *Dialogues*, but its form is actually a speech. The question is, Is it a dialogue that has just a veneer of a speech over it or is this Plato's rendition of what might have been an actual historical speech? So it is there, an unironic reading of the *Apology*. In the last 10-15 years, people have started to make that argument. It is a very complicated argument, but you should know that there is some scholars in the academy today who think that Socrates might have made some argument like this in front of the Athenians and that it is quite interesting that he only missed by 30 or 40 jurors. So if Socrates kind of spit in the face of the jury and just said, "I don't have anything to do with your system or your laws," he would have made no attempt at all to win over any of the jurors. Just the fact that he got almost 50 percent of the jury is quite interesting. And it allows us to wonder whether in general we can see this speech as a memory of some kind of real speech that

had a certain kind of meaning in Plato's day, but also we can continue to see it as a defense of Socrates's life and the Socratic method and, in a sense, the whole Western philosophical project, which is really how we read it now. When I present in the classroom, I let the students have both ways.