

Wrongfully Accused: The Political Motivations behind Socrates' Execution

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In 399 B.C.E., Socrates was executed by the Athenian court on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth. The controversial decision lingers atop the great legacy of Athens, a city praised for its intellectual and political liberty. However, the reasons behind Socrates' execution are themselves questionable. Firstly, the charge of impiety is a vague accusation which would have been unlikely to produce a conviction on its own. Similarly, the second charge of corrupting the youth is ambiguous and lacks any substantial evidence in support of it. Instead, a primary cause of the execution is Socrates' relationship with two violent oligarchic tyrants. Moreover, Socrates' constant criticism of Athens' civic structure and the city's prominent citizens leads to growing animosity towards his public presence. Finally, the instability of Athens in the wake of the oligarchic coup of 404 B.C.E. amplifies the desire to eliminate sources of dissent, such as Socrates. Thus, Socrates' execution by the Athenians is not caused by the explicit charges of impiety and corrupting the youth, but rather by implicit political motivations which come to a head in 399 B.C.E.

Plato's *Apology* is a major source for the trial of Socrates although it

comes with its own problems. Historians such as J. Burnet have argued that Platonic sources express Plato's own fictitious version of the trial and particularly Socrates' defence, and should thus not be considered as a reliable study of Socrates' execution.¹ Although Plato undoubtedly possesses a bias in favour of his mentor and friend, there are several reasons for asserting that Plato's *Apology* is a valid and accurate source. Firstly, Plato is an eye-witness of the trial; his presence being noted by Socrates during the defence speech.² Secondly, Plato wrote his account shortly after the trial, perhaps within a few years of 399 B.C.E, when the event was still fresh in both his and Athens' collective memory. Additionally, Plato's account would have been read by others present at the trial. As such, any substantial deviation from the trial's events would have been widely criticized. Therefore, although the *Apology* is unlikely to be a verbatim account of Socrates' speech, it possesses the general ideas and arguments presented at the trial.

However, despite the usefulness of Plato's account, the explicit charge of impiety is not the cause of Socrates' execution. The first portion of Socrates' indictment reads, "Socrates is guilty of not recognizing the gods recognized by the city, and of introducing other new divinities."³ Such an accusation would have been easily understood in a society with a clearly defined state religion, such as that found in medieval Europe. However, classical Greece possessed a vast array of gods and goddesses that changed throughout antiquity. For example, within the city of Athens, foreigners, non-citizens, and slaves continued to practice different religions and worshiped unsanctioned gods even after gaining Athenian citizenship.⁴ Indeed, foreign religions are easily found and often accepted by the city's populace.

Consider the reaction of citizens after successive bouts of plague during the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. Citizens were so desperate to escape from what they presumed to be the anger of the gods that they openly engaged in acts of impiety such as following the “ventriloquist prophets”.⁵ These ventriloquists became quite popular in the period preceding Socrates' trial, and contributed to the overall ambiguity of what piety was. Indeed, by 399 B.C.E., not even Meletus, the prosecutor of Socrates, had a clear idea of what impiety really meant.⁶ Clearly Athens' religious culture was tolerant of foreign deities and open to new ideas of religion.

Apart from the vague definition of piety, a popular practice in the fifth century B.C.E was criticizing Athenian deities. This practice is evident through the denigration of gods in poetry and comic plays. For example, Aeschylus presents a derogatory depiction of the Greek god Zeus in his Oresteian trilogy.⁷ Poets such as Euripides and Pindar denied Greek myths without fear of reprisal. Evidently, it was common practice in this period to mock the gods in the most public venues of the Athenian polis, and the playwrights and poets behind such sacrilege were not charged with impiety. Thus, the charge of impiety was not one which was enforced in Athenian law. Consequently it was unlikely to be a legitimate accusation against Socrates.

A final opposition to the charge of impiety is that Socrates often had traditional pious views. In addition, his more foreign practices were well within the limits of Athenian religious practices. Socrates' expressions of uncertainty about death, that “it is either a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul

from this world to another” are prime examples of his comparability with traditional Greek religious views.⁸ The debate between these polar views of death, an unconscious state versus the existence of a distinct world, is similarly described by Cephalus, a traditionally pious figure who appears in Plato’s *Republic*.⁹ The similar views presented by Socrates, a philosopher, and Cephalus, a pious Athenian, illustrate that Socrates’ outlook on a subject as important as death was reconcilable with popular Athenian belief. This belief is corroborated by Xenophon’s *Defence of Socrates*, wherein he states Socrates “was no more bringing in anything strange than are other believers in divination, who believe in augury, oracles, coincidences and sacrifices.”¹⁰ Indeed, Athens’ religion was so varied in its sources and practices that any seemingly “strange” practice of Socrates fitted well into the Athenian traditional concept of piety. Consequently, the ambiguity and high tolerance of the state religion of Athens, the public criticisms of the Greek pantheon by poets and playwrights, and the similarities between Socrates’ religious practices and those of pious men demonstrate that the charge of impiety was both irrelevant and fictitious. Thus, it was an unjustifiable reason for Socrates’ execution.

Similar to the accusation of impiety, the charge of corrupting the youth is a vague and uncorroborated attack on Socrates, which could not have resulted in his execution by the Athenians in 399 B.C.E. This second charge asserts that Socrates had turned the youth away from showing respect to their parents and in some way directed them towards dishonourable behaviour. This charge rests primarily on the belief that Socrates was a sophist; a teacher who educated students for a fee mainly in the art of rheto-

ric. The sophists are generally disliked for their deceitful use of language to “make the weaker argument seem the stronger.”¹¹ However, Socrates does not possess any of the characteristics that define a sophist. Firstly he teaches in public, unlike the sophists who had private schools. Xenophon, a former student, explains that “Socrates lived ever in the open, for early in the morning he went to the public promenades and training grounds, in the forenoon he was seen in the market, and the rest of the day he passed just where most people were to be met.”¹² Socrates spends his entire day in the Athenian agora, speaking to anyone who was willing to listen; “young or old, he is not excluded.”¹³ Moreover, these public discussions imply that Socrates did not charge any fee, unlike the sophists who admitted only wealthy students that could afford the costs. Socrates even states that “not even the impudence of [his] accusers dares to say that [he] ever exacted or sought pay of anyone; of that they have no witness.”¹⁴ A final disparity between Socrates and the sophists was that he practiced without a specific teaching curriculum. Whereas the sophists offered a formal education that provided the student with a degree, Socrates merely questioned those he wished to instruct. His subjects and methods varied based on the responses of each individual and was inherently informal and ever-changing. Thus, Socrates' teaching method was fundamentally different to the sophist system.

Moreover, Socrates counters the charge of corrupting the youth by revealing that the prosecution had no witnesses. He invites, “those who are now grown up and realize that [he] gave them bad advice in their youth to come forward as accusers and take their revenge. Or if they do not wish to

come themselves, some of their relatives[...].”¹⁵ Despite naming numerous of his former students and their relatives who are present at the trial, no witness comes forward to speak against Socrates. One can argue that no former student or relative present believed he was guilty of corrupting the youth. Hence, the disparity between Socrates and the sophists as well as the failure of the prosecution to produce a single witness to support their charge, makes it evident that Socrates was not guilty of corrupting the youth. Therefore this accusation could not have been the cause of his conviction.

As such, the explicit charges of not following religious practices and corrupting the youth are not reasonable causes for Socrates execution. The following will suggest that that ulterior political motives prompted Socrates’ death. A primary political motivation for Socrates’ execution was his close relationship with two important oligarchic figures and a famous traitor who joined the Spartan cause during the Peloponnesian War. In 404 B.C.E., a group of oligarchic politicians took over Athens and instituted a government commonly known as the ‘Thirty Tyrants’ or simply, the ‘Thirty’. Two key leaders of this oligarchic movement, Critias and Charmides, were students of Socrates before taking up a life of politics. When Athens reasserted itself as a democracy in 403 B.C.E, the oligarchs were overthrown and a general amnesty was proclaimed to protect all except the most senior oligarchic leaders from prosecution. However, this amnesty did not imply that the violent rule of the Thirty was forgotten. The exiled democrats for one who returned to the city were unlikely to forget their bitter treatment and material losses so quickly. It is likely that they would look for retribution against any oligarchic supporters. Socrates’ position as the teacher of these key oli-

garchic figures certainly made it appear that he supported the rule of the Thirty. Furthermore, Socrates remained in Athens unharmed during the turmoil while as many as 1500 wealthy citizens were killed and thousands more were exiled from the city.¹⁶

During this period, Socrates was in contact with the Thirty. For example, he states that “they [the oligarchs] sent for [him] and four others to the council chamber and ordered [them] to bring Leon the Salamian...since they wanted to put him to death.”¹⁷ Socrates refused to kill Leon, however the Athenians viewed the request as evidence to suggest that not only was he trusted by the Tyrants, yet he supported their illegitimate rule. Additionally, Socrates admits that he did not oppose the Thirty’s decision to kill Leon, an innocent man, but instead just “went quietly home.”¹⁸ Many democratic Athenians assumed that Socrates was partial to the rule of his former students, and did little to defend Athens against their criminal activity. For instance, the crimes of Critias and Alcibiades were linked to Socrates and it essentially became what historian Coleman Phillipson calls a case of “like pupil, like master.”¹⁹ Hence, Socrates’ relationship with the tyrannical oligarchs Critias and Charmides caused the Athenian populace to consider Socrates an oligarch who conspired against the Athenian democracy.

Secondly, Socrates’ incessant criticism of politicians and the practices of the Athenian government caused further suspicion of his oligarchic inclinations as well as inciting anger from prominent citizens. Socrates’ non-democratic views included his belief that private deliberation was better than public, as well as a “disdain [for] the institutional practices that maintained the constitutional life of the Athenian *polis*.”²⁰ Moreover, he dis-

proved of a system where officials were elected. In Xenophon's *Defence of Socrates*. "... [Socrates] taught his companions to despise the established laws by insisting on the folly of appointing public officials by lot, when none would choose a pilot or builder of flutist by lot, nor any other craftsman for work in which mistakes are far less disastrous than mistakes in statecraft."²¹ Thus, Socrates argues that if less important occupations were chosen based on talent then so should the election of Athenian politicians. In other words, Athens' politicians should be selected on a basis of merit in comparison to the public vote. Xenophon makes no effort to deny that Socrates often spoke on this subject and it can therefore be concluded that Socrates did regularly make statements contrary to democratic policy.

Furthermore, Socrates uses his *techné*, or method, of cross-examination to demonstrate the foolishness and false reasoning of those with whom he conversed. For example, Socrates effectively cross-examines Anytus until he comes to the conclusion that the great democratic politician Pericles was actually unable to improve the virtue of Athens.²² This attack on a key figure of Athenian democracy provokes an outburst from Anytus: "I would warn you to be careful. Perhaps there is no city in which it is not easier to do men harm than do them good, and this is certainly true at Athens."²³ Anytus' threat is not the only account of resentment against Socrates. While conversing with Callicles, an Athenian statesman, Socrates claims that he himself is the only true politician of his time.²⁴ Callicles predicts that Socrates will be brought into court for this blatant criticism of all contemporary politicians. Indeed, Socrates notes that "this inquisition has brought [him] many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind."²⁵ Thus,

Socrates' consistent criticism of the Athenian political structure and its politicians caused prominent citizens to distrust Socrates and consider him politically dangerous.

The aforementioned oligarchic associates of Socrates and his criticism of Athenian government are amplified by the instability of Athens in the wake of the Peloponnesian War and the rule of the Thirty Tyrants. The Peloponnesian War (432-404 B.C.E.) brought with it annual invasions and territorial losses to Athens. These hardships were amplified by the epidemics from poor nutrition and overcrowding. Outbreaks of plague between 430 and 426 B.C.E. resulted in the death of up to one third of the Athenian populace, and a great many more were incapacitated.²⁶ In addition, the aforementioned violent rule of the Thirty Tyrants prompted the deaths and exiles of many wealthy and important citizens who were considered enemies of the oligarchic state. The government was overthrown in 403 B.C.E. by a forceful coup orchestrated by democratic supporters. This is the context of Socrates' trial. Athens was a fragile city-state at the end of the fifth century B.C.E. The newly recreated democracy was relatively weak and unstable, and the Athenian democrats were wary of the potential for civil conflict. A prime example of this caution is found in the amnesty of 403 B.C.E., which can be seen as an explicit attempt by the democratic leaders to stabilize their society and prevent any backlash against citizens who remained in Athens during the reign of the Thirty. Under such conditions, a figure who possessed a very close relationship to the Tyrants and was constantly criticizing the Athenian government and its officials, was perceived as a threat to peace and stability. Socrates possessed all of these

characteristics and as a result his voice of dissent needed to be silenced. He is a self-described “gadfly” of the state and by 399 B.C.E., the delicate political conditions of Athens have reached a climax, and the ‘gadfly’ must be swatted.²⁷ Hence, Socrates’ oligarchic associates, his critiques of democracy and cross-examination of key political figures, as well as the instability of the democratic *polis* in the year 399 B.C.E. are factors that portrayed Socrates as a political threat that must be removed.

Although the political motives behind the trial are compelling, some historians assert that Socrates was actually brought to trial because he offended the sophists of Athens. This recent argument by Kenneth Blanchard claims that Socrates’ criticism of sophist practices and incites these teachers of rhetoric to indict and execute him.²⁸ However, accusing Socrates of impiety and corrupting the youth would have only served to increase the public dislike for these teachers themselves, who “make the weaker argument seem the stronger.” This is so because Socrates was often grouped into the field of sophism whether before his trial, such as in Aristophanes’ comic play *The Clouds*, and well after the execution when the orator Aeschines refers to the trial of “Socrates the sophist”.²⁹ As such, even though the sophists considered Socrates an enemy, prosecuting him would have been self-destructive since some of the public viewed him as one of them. Therefore, political goals behind Socrates’ execution are more reasonable explanations than the sophist-based thesis expressed by Blanchard.

In brief, the overtly stated charges of impiety and corrupting the youth as expressed in the indictment against Socrates cannot be considered the cause of his execution. Instead, the true motivation behind the trial is a

political one; Socrates comes to be seen as a symbol of civil defiance and must be silenced. The first explicit charge of not submitting to state religion is essentially a meaningless accusation because of the vast array of gods and religious practices which existed in the fifth century B.C.E. Moreover, the very public denigration of gods in poetry and theatre and the fact that Socrates possessed some traditional pious beliefs also disprove this charge. The second charge of corrupting the youth is also false for two reasons: firstly, it relies largely on the fictitious notion that Socrates is a sophist, and secondly, the prosecution fails to bring a single witness to corroborate this claim despite Socrates' repeated requests. In contrast to these accusations, the implicit political motivations for the trial are extremely likely to have brought about Socrates' execution. Primarily, Socrates' association with two key actors from the Thirty gave the perception that he was an oligarch himself. Additionally, Socrates constantly criticizes the democracy in terms of its processes, institutions and statesmen. Finally, the political turmoil preceding the trial of Socrates leaves the Athenian government in a weakened position, creating a need to suppress Socrates' opposition to the state in order to preserve political stability. Consequently, Socrates happened to be in the wrong era to express his political thoughts.

Endnotes

¹ J. Burnet., *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1924), 63-6.

² Plato. *Apol.*, trans. Benjamin Jowett. 38b; Socrates states that Plato and several other supporters who are present have offered to pay a fine of thirty minas on his behalf in lieu of

the death penalty.

³ DiogLaert. 2.40 (cf. Plato. *Apol.* 24b and Xen. *Mem.* I.i.1).

⁴ Coleman Phillipson, *The Trial of Socrates* (London, Stephen and Sons, 1928), 10.

⁵ Phillipson, *The Trial of Socrates*, 10.

⁶ A.E. Taylor, *Socrates* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953) 108-9.

⁷ Phillipson, *The Trial of Socrates*, 217.

⁸ Plato. *Apol.*, 40c.

⁹ Plato. *Rep.* (Project Gutenberg, 1994), trans. Benjamin Jowett, 150, Cephalus states, in part, “that when a man thinks himself to be near death, fears and cares enter into his mind which he never had before; the tales of a world below and the punishment which is exacted there of deeds done here were once a laughing matter to him, but now he is tormented with the thought that they may be true.” Socrates’ similar doubts of the nature of the afterlife are found in sections 40-42 of the *Apology*.

¹⁰ Xen. *Mem.* in *The Question of Socrates*, ed. Richard Levin, 124-162 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World), I.i.3

¹¹ Kenneth Blanchard, “The Enemies of Socrates: Piety and Sophism in the Socratic Drama,” *The Review of Politics* 62:3 (Summer 2000): 426-427.

¹² Xen. *Mem.* I.i.10.

¹³ Plato. *Apol.* 33b.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31c.

¹⁵ Plato. *Apol.* 32d.

¹⁶ Anytus, one of the prosecutors of Socrates, was himself one of the citizens forced to flee Athens during the Tyrants’ purging of the city (see Paul Millet, “The Trial of Socrates Re-visited,” In *European Review of History* 12:1 (March 2005): 32).

¹⁷ Plato. *Apol.* 32c.

¹⁸ Plato. *Apol.* 32d.

¹⁹ Phillipson, *The Trial of Socrates*, 210.

²⁰ J.R. Wallach, "Socratic Citizenship" in *Socrates: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. William J. Prior (London: Routledge, 1996), 83.

²¹ Xen. *Mem.* I.i.9.

²² Plato, *Meno*, 93-94.

²³ Plato. *Meno*, 94-95a.

²⁴ Plato. *Gorgias*, 521.

²⁵ Plato. *Apol.* 30e.

²⁶ Millet, "The Trial of Socrates Revisited," 32.

²⁷ Plato. *Apol.* 30e.

²⁸ Blanchard, "The Enemies of Socrates: Piety and Sophism in the Socratic Drama," 421-449.

²⁹ Aristophanes, *The Clouds*; Millet, "The Trial of Socrates Revisited," 23-24.

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