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# THE *APOLOGY*: THE BEGINNING OF PLATO'S OWN PHILOSOPHY

## 1. *Preliminary remarks*

It has often been assumed that Plato's *Apology* is a faithful recreation of Socrates' speech on the final day of his trial in 399 B.C.; that it contains almost nothing of Plato's own philosophy; and that it therefore represents rather the position of the historical Socrates on how to live and how to philosophize. In this belief, Schleiermacher relegated the *Apology* to an appendix to his translation of Plato, along with (among others) some spurious works.[1] His view was followed by Zeller and Grote in the late nineteenth century,[2] and further popularized in the 1920s by Burnet's edition of the *Apology*.[3]

However, there is no independent evidence to confirm the historicity of Socrates' speech in Plato's *Apology*. And Plato's contemporary Xenophon, in his own *Apology* (1–9), tells a different story: the real reason for Socrates' *megalêgoria* was his conviction that the bodily and mental troubles brought on by old age made it not worth while to live any longer. This seems out of step with Plato's version, which leads us to assume that it was Socrates' conviction of his own divine mission that led him to speak as he did in court. Thus if Plato is to be believed, Socrates' speech is unlikely to have been such as to permit Xenophon's conjecture, while if Xenophon is right it becomes difficult to imagine that Socrates spoke as portrayed in Plato's *Apology*.

We are stuck with two quite different accounts of Socrates' speech, and no privileged perspective from which to arbitrate between them. I agree with Hackforth's thesis[4] that down to the end of the fifth century B.C. there was simply no literary tradition of writing historically truthful biography, and that Plato's *Apology* should be thought of as more akin to Thucydides' history, in which the circumstances and details were narrated partly by those who had played an important role in the events, portrayed as speaking in the way in which they could be expected to have spoken on those occasions. This view of Hackforth's offers us the ingenious insight that on the one hand the *Apology* is not a forgery or a purely imaginative fiction, while on the other its readers did not expect to find in it a historically faithful report of Socrates' actual speech either (contrary to Burnet's view),[5] but rather the author's own

[1] F. Schleiermacher, *Platons Werke*[3] (Berlin, 1855; first edn 1804), ii.125–30.

[2] E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*[4] (Leipzig, 1889; first edn 1844–52), ii (1) 195–7 n. 1; G. Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates*, i (1865), p. 281.

[3] J. Burnet, *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates and Crito* (Oxford, 1924), pp. 63–6. Most recent discussions take broadly this same view: cf. G. Vlastos, introd. to G. Vlastos (ed.), *The Philosophy of Socrates* (Garden City, 1971), pp. 3–4; id., 'Socrates', *Proc. Brit. Acad.* 74 (1988), 89–111; R. E. Allen, *Socrates and Legal Obligation* (Minneapolis, 1980), pp. 33–6; T. C. Brickhouse, N. D. Smith, *Socrates on Trial* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 2–10; C. D. C. Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology* (Indianapolis, 1989), xiii (with reservations).

[4] R. Hackforth, *The Composition of Plato's Apology* (Cambridge, 1933), pp. 1–7.

[5] Burnet, op. cit., pp. 63–4. Although Grote goes along with the view of *Apol.* as giving 'in substance the real defence pronounced by Socrates', he also (op. cit., i.281–3 and n.) quotes Dionysius of Halicarnassus' view of it (*Ars rhet.* VIII A8, *De antiq. or.* B, *De Demosth. dict.* 23) as 'not a report of what Sokrates really said, nor as approximating thereunto, but as a pure composition of Plato himself, for three purposes combined: – 1. To defend and extol Sokrates. 2. To accuse the Athenian public and Dikasts. 3. To furnish a picture of what a philosopher

understanding of the Socrates case – just as they did no doubt in Xenophon's *Apology* and in the many other works on the trial published around the same time.[6]

If this is right, Plato did indeed wish to present the objective truth about Socrates to the Athenian people, and yet the representation (*mimêsis* in the good sense) of an extraordinary event concerning an extraordinary man must inevitably contain features peculiar to the observer who represents it. To make the truth of Socrates' trial clear meant for him to reveal the true meaning of Socrates' life and death – their true meaning, that is, as understood by Plato. And it seems to me that Plato came to that understanding gradually, first in the course of Socrates' trial and death, later by years of further reflection. Thus we should expect the *Apology* to express on the one hand Socrates' philosophy, but also, on the other hand, Plato's. The process of coming to understand his master's philosophy, and that of laying the foundations of his own philosophy, were, I believe, one and the same. If so, we can rightly call the *Apology* the beginning of Plato's own philosophy.

I do not deny that Plato's *Apology* has as its basis the real speech of Socrates at his trial in 399 B.C. But it is also true that we possess no absolute standpoint from which to decide which words were, and which were not, actually spoken by Socrates on that day. We can only learn the fundamental structure of Socrates' philosophy as it was understood by Plato, and I think we can do this by examining the formal structure of its composition. That is my task in this paper. I shall call it a 'formal' reading of the *Apology* – by contrast with the search for evidence of the historical Socrates in it, which I shall call a 'material' reading.

## 2. *The indictment*

There are three extant versions of the indictment against Socrates – in Diogenes Laertius, in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, and in Plato's *Apology*:

(1) ἀδικεῖ Σωκράτης, οὓς μὲν ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεοὺς οὐ νομίζων, ἕτερα δὲ καινὰ δαιμόνια εἰσηγούμενος· ἀδικεῖ δὲ καὶ τοὺς νέους διαφθείρων.

(Diogenes Laertius 2.40)

Socrates is guilty of not recognizing the gods recognized by the city, and of introducing other new divinities. He is also guilty of corrupting the youth.

(2) ἀδικεῖ Σωκράτης οὓς μὲν ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεοὺς οὐ νομίζων, ἕτερα δὲ καινὰ δαιμόνια εἰσφέρων· ἀδικεῖ δὲ καὶ τοὺς νέους διαφθείρων.

(Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.1.1)

Socrates is guilty of not recognizing the gods recognized by the city, and of bringing in other new divinities. He is also guilty of corrupting the youth.

(3) Σωκράτη φησὶν ἀδικεῖν τούς τε νέους διαφθείροντα καὶ θεοὺς οὓς ἡ πόλις νομίζει οὐ νομίζοντα, ἕτερα δὲ δαιμόνια καινά.

(Plato, *Apology* 24b8–c1)

(He says that) Socrates is guilty of corrupting the youth, and of not recognizing the gods recognized by the city, but other new divinities.

Of these, (1) is generally held to be the closest to Meletus' original indictment, on the authority of Favorinus (first–second century A.D.), Diogenes' source, who claims

ought to be.' Grote adds, 'All these purposes are to a certain extent included and merged in a fourth, which I hold to be the true one, to exhibit what Sokrates was and had been, in relation to the Athenian public.' If we may add to this fourth purpose the qualification 'as perceived by Plato', Grote's view seems to be in substance the same as my own.

[6] E.g. Polycrates' pamphlet *Accusation of Socrates* and Lysias' reply; cf. Hackforth, op. cit., pp. 4–5.

to be quoting the version preserved in the Metroon – the temple of Cybele where the official documents of Athens were housed. (2) differs from it only in its word for 'introducing', and is otherwise identical. There is little to be gained by speculating about the implications of this minute difference. But (3), Plato's version, differs so conspicuously from them both, not only in its phraseology but also in the order of the clauses themselves, as to constitute a quite distinct form of the indictment.[7]

The coincidence between Diogenes' and Xenophon's versions seems to give their testimony great weight. If so, what should we think of Plato's? Did he intentionally twist the wording of the original indictment and put a false version into Socrates' mouth?[8] Or was it Socrates himself who did so in his actual speech ?[9] As I have already remarked, we do not have any evidence to decide this question. Even so, if we can find a significant link between the form of the indictment quoted and the form of Socrates' argument against Meletus, we will obtain a vital clue about Socrates' strategy in that argument – a strategy, it will turn out, which allows him right from the start to take the battle into the enemy's camp. Thus despite not knowing whether Plato or Socrates is ultimately responsible, we can still learn the essential structure of the *Apology*'s composition. That is what I call a formal reading of the *Apology*.

To pursue this point, we must investigate further the features which distinguish Plato's version of the indictment – henceforth 'P' – from that shared by Diogenes Laertius and Xenophon – henceforth 'DL/X'.

(i) In DL/X the formal term of accusation, 'is guilty' (ἀδικεῖ), is repeated with each charge, while in P it occurs only once, the two charges then being combined by connective particles (τε ... καί).

(ii) In DL/X the charge of an obviously religious offence comes first, and the charge of an offence which in itself belongs rather to the domain of education follows. In P this order is reversed.

(iii) The religious charge is itself differently constructed in the two versions. In DL/X each limb of the charge has its own verb ('not recognizing... introducing/bringing in'), while in P the second verb is missing and the first alone governs the whole clause.

(iv) The word order καινὰ δαιμόνια in DL/X is reversed in P. This may look a negligible difference; but in context, and taken jointly with the difference noted in (iii), it has an important effect on the meaning of the clause.[10]

Now if we take all four points together, and bear in mind that these forms of indictment are those presented by the accusers upon solemn oath, it becomes clear that we are confronted with two altogether different accusations. And their differences are crucial for understanding the *Apology*.

[7] Grote in his first edition (op. cit., p. 283 n.) suggested the possibility that there had been 'two distinct forms of indictment', on the ground that there were three different accusers – Meletus, Anytus and Lycon. But in his third edition he deleted this passage. In recent work the difference between the two versions has been noted, but no special significance attached to it (Brickhouse and Smith, op. cit., p. 30; Reeve, op. cit., p. 74).

[8] The view of Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socrates* (Ithaca and London, 1972, p. 74).

[9] Burnet's view (op. cit., p. 102): commenting on ἔχει δέ πως ὧδε (24b8), he attributes the alteration to Socrates' attitude, 'quoting from memory', but does not indicate whether Socrates did so intentionally or not.

[10] This change makes καινά less conspicuous in P than in DL/X. In the subsequent argument Socrates totally neglects the force of this restrictive adjective, which might have carried much weight in the DL/X version, and only deals with consequences of belief in δαιμόνια (cf. 27b3–28a1). Notice also the effect of the disjunctive phrase εἴτ' οὖν καινὰ εἴτε παλαιά at 27c6, which clearly weakens the force of καινά.

In Plato's version, thanks to points (i) and (ii) above, Meletus' charge against Socrates becomes mainly the educational charge of corrupting the youth. The religious charge is added to the first as an auxiliary one, explaining in what way Socrates is corrupting the youth. (This will become clear in the course of Socrates' argument – see 26b2–5.)

To see the significance of this, we must take into account some external circumstances surrounding Socrates' trial. Scholars have often wondered why Meletus' accusation was one deemed suitable for trial in the court of the King Archon. For they have felt that Socrates' behaviour gave no reasonable ground, by contemporary religious standards, for accusing him of a religious offence. That the word νομίζειν in the indictment has played an important role in the controversy is well known (a point I shall return to later). But their contention seems to depend largely on following Plato's version of the indictment. If we take the DL/X version at face value, it should be clear that the accusation was of a predominantly religious offence, and that the magistrates had no choice but to accept it for trial once it was presented to them. For, even leaving aside the meaning of νομίζειν, the second charge of 'introducing other new divinities' unambiguously points to a religious crime. In Plato's version, by contrast, this sharp edge of the accusation is taken off by omitting the word 'introducing' (or 'bringing in'). But why did Socrates do this? Or why did Plato let Socrates do it? This is the pivotal question which we must now examine.

It is very likely that the real ground of suspicion against Socrates on the part of the democrats was, as many commentators have supposed, his close relationship with Critias and Charmides, their enemies, and with the traitor Alcibiades. The amnesty decree of 404/3 forbade anyone's being accused of a crime committed before 403. So it was a necessary formality for Meletus to accuse Socrates of a religious crime in order to bring him to court. The charge of an obviously religious crime was thus indispensable for Meletus. However, such a charge had little real relevance to Socrates. That, it seems, is why from the outset he intentionally shifted the focus of debate to the one which did concern him, the one about the education of youth. In this shift of emphasis we can see, I believe, the basis from which his whole argument will develop.

So far we have seen the effects of the differences identified in points (i) and (ii) above. We must also consider point (iii) – how the religious charge is itself transformed by omission of the word 'introducing', so that the verb 'recognizing' (νομίζοντα) alone carries all the weight. What is the significance of νομίζειν? Burnet asserted that it could not refer to one's subjective 'believing in' the gods, but only to one's objective behaviour with regard to religious observance – 'to observe the cult of the religion of the City'. For the jurisdiction of the King Archon extended, according to him, not to religious orthodoxy, but only to conformity with the religious practice of the city.[11] Against Burnet Hackforth argued, by appeal to the textual evidence of Plato's *Apology* as well as Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, that the verb could also designate belief in the existence of the gods, whether its object was the infinitive clause θεοὺς εἶναι or the simple accusative θεούς.[12]

Burnet is probably right that in the original indictment, and thus also in the original intention of Meletus and Anytus, the verb designated religious observance. Only thus could the charge of a religious offence have been brought before the Athenian court at that time. On the other hand, the cumulative evidence adduced by Hackforth puts it beyond doubt that it does also in the context of the *Apology* carry the sense 'to

[11] Burnet, op. cit., p. 104.

[12] Hackforth, op. cit., pp. 59–104.

believe in the existence of the gods'. What I want to suggest is that it was Socrates (or Plato) himself who shifted the meaning of the verb in this latter direction; that it was precisely this manoeuvre that helped Socrates to build his argument against Meletus; and that this device reveals the fundamental structure of the argument. The crux of the debate was deliberately transferred from the problem of religious observance, where Meletus had directed his attack, to that of religious belief, from which Socrates would launch his defence. For in the religious consciousness of Socrates and Plato the latter is *par excellence* the area in which human rectitude towards divinity, i.e. piety,[13] can be tested and observed, and also in which the proper education of the young resides.[14] By contrast, those ritual observances of civic religion on which Meletus insisted are harmful in the eyes of Socrates and Plato, if they are not accompanied by the right internal belief, and it is those who insist solely on ritual observances, like Meletus, who are in fact corrupting the youth.

The aim of Socrates' argument is, it seems to me, to demonstrate these points, and to show that Meletus has never been concerned with these matters at all: neither with religion nor with the education of the youth.[15] It is not necessary to enter here into the details of Socrates' argument against Meletus, which is in itself a fine example of Socratic elenchus. It should suffice to notice that this line of thought determines the entire structure of Socrates' argument against Meletus, and that this in turn determines the compositional scheme of the *Apology* as a whole.

## 3. '*The whole truth*'

At the very beginning of his speech Socrates declares that he will tell 'the whole truth' (πᾶσαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν, 17b8). Sometimes the negative side of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge in the earlier dialogues is so much emphasized as to give the impression that he had nothing to assert unconditionally. But on the evidence of these words we must admit that he had.[16] I believe that it is in the interlacing of these two seemingly contradictory strands – his undertaking to tell the truth, and his disavowal of knowledge[17] – that the central message of the *Apology* lies. For in the course of Socrates' speech we see them both turning up, twined round each other, as constituent elements of one and the same thing, namely Socrates' philosophy – or rather, Socrates' philosophy as understood by Plato, Thus, I believe, the foundation of Plato's own philosophical endeavours, the starting point of his entire subsequent development, comes to be laid.

Let me add some remarks on the conception of truth employed here.

At the same time as claiming to tell the whole truth, Socrates insists that his accusers did not say anything true (17a3–4, b6–7), thus emphasizing further the problem of truth as the central theme of the ensuing speech. This further assertion, taken literally, is quite astonishing, unless we construe its qualifying phrase 'so to speak' (ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν) not as a mere rhetorical touch but as a substantial restriction.

[13] Book 10 of the *Laws*, Plato's last work, offers the finest exposition of his lifelong position on 'piety'. [14] *Rep.* 2 is evidently written for this purpose.

[15] That Meletus was not in the least concerned with the matters in question is strongly emphasized by a fourfold reiteration: 24c7–8, d9, 25c3–4, 26b1–2.

[16] That Socrates is the one who tells the truth is constantly asserted in *Apol.*: 17b7–8, 18a6, 20d5, 22a2, b5–6, etc. At *Gorg.* 473b6 the truth is declared to be the unique property of Socrates (taking καί as appositive, with W. Hamilton's translation [Harmondsworth, 1960]). For a variant of the same point, cf. *Tht.* 150a8–b4, b9–c3: Socrates as midwife, though barren, still has the ability to distinguish truth and falsity of thought.

[17] For a different view on this problem, based on a distinction between two senses of 'knowledge', see G. Vlastos, 'Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge', *PQ* 35 (1985), 1–31.

Can we imagine that the accusers did not say anything about Socrates which could be in any way verified – for instance 'Socrates is an Athenian citizen of the deme Alopeke', 'He is the son of Sophroniscus', or 'He converses with others in the marketplace'? That would be silly. Should we then think of Socrates' assertion as restricted in its scope to the truth of the charges brought against him, thus introducing a point-by-point demonstration of their falsity in his ensuing speech? This is partly correct, for Socrates proposes in several passages to do just that (19c8–d7, d8–e1, 20c1–3). But to our surprise, his actual refutation is addressed purely to the fictional charge which he has himself constructed. In stark contrast to Xenophon's defence of him in the *Memorabilia*,[18] Plato's Socrates offers no factual evidence at all against Meletus' actual charge.

To defend oneself in such a way would be a very unusual and strange procedure in a court of law, as many commentators have noticed. But it seems to me that it has a close connexion with Socrates' own special conception of truth in the *Apology*. It is not a question of truths testable by simple reference to public facts,[19] but of truths understood only in the light of their entire causal context. Socrates can assert that he will tell the whole truth, in so far as he is convinced that he has grasped the whole ground of the accusation against him – its origins, the course it has taken, and probably the end at which it is aiming. In contrast to this, his accusers can say nothing that is true, because they do not know the true cause of the matter with which their accusations are concerned. Truth thus understood is not something to be grasped in isolation, but in the light of the entire causal background. Detailed examination of Socrates' argument in the first part of his main defence will confirm this interpretation.

As is well known, Socrates' defence takes the following form. Remarking that those of his accusers who are older than Meletus are harder to deal with, because they are anonymous and were already accusing him when the present jurors were still young, he proposes to refute them first, and his younger accusers later. Between these two refutations he inserts the story of the Delphic oracle, which discloses the real reason for the deep enmity towards him which has led Meletus and others to bring the charge. We might almost say that this first part constitutes the main body of his defence. For it points out the real cause of the accusation brought against him, and this is the 'whole truth' which he wants to reveal in his speech – notice the same phrase, 'the whole truth' (*πᾶσαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν*), reiterated at 20d5 in the crucial passage which introduces this part of the defence. Once this has been done, the charges Meletus and others have brought do not trouble him any more.

Thus we can say that the strategy of Socrates' defence is conceived as follows:

(1) to make it clear that Meletus and his associates were never concerned at all about the matters of which they accused Socrates (this step occurs in the latter part of the main defence), and that they have brought the action against him merely through being persuaded by the older accusers and prompted by the widespread enmity towards him, not through any concern with the truth itself;

(2) to show that the charges of the older accusers had nothing at all to do with Socrates (the first move of his defence);

(3) to reveal the true source of the deep public enmity towards Socrates (the second and main part of his defence).

[18] Socrates' self-defence in Xenophon's *Apol.* (11–21) is similar to Xenophon's defence of him in *Mem.*

[19] In my view it is in *Tht.* that truth and falsity first become clearly propositional; and that shifts the focus of the problem of knowledge from 'wisdom' to knowledge in general (*ἐπιστήμη*): cf. *Tht.* 145d7–e9.

What was the charge of the older accusers, according to his own grasp of the whole truth about the trial? It was the charge that he is *a wise man* (*σοφὸς ἀνήρ* 18b6) who inquires into things below the earth and in the sky, and who makes the weaker argument the stronger. Against this Socrates defends himself by assuring the jury that he does not possess any such wisdom. In this first round of his defence, it is highly significant that the issue is Socrates' *wisdom*. It does not matter whether he has any knowledge or not, only whether he is the kind of man who is rightly called 'wise'. Thus right at the beginning of Socrates' main defence the sole issue addressed is the kind of wisdom of which human beings can or cannot partake. It seems to me that, as Socrates (or Plato) saw it, this was *the* issue with which the trial was concerned.[20]

The story of the Delphic oracle explains how Socrates acquired his practice of questioning others, who thought themselves wise, in order to prove that they were not, and thus provoked widespread enmity, while the pleasure which the young took in witnessing and imitating these examinations led to his reputation for 'corrupting the youth'. The story contains several important clues about Plato's conception of Socrates' philosophy:

First, there is an inevitable discrepancy between, on the one hand, the unambiguous oracular pronouncement that no one is wiser than Socrates (21a6–7, *μηδένα σοφώτερον εἶναι*), and, on the other, Socrates' firm awareness that he is not in the least aware of himself being wise (21b4–5, *ἐγὼ γὰρ δὴ οὔτε μέγα οὔτε σμικρὸν σύνοιδα ἐμαυτῷ σοφὸς ὤν*).[21] While it is piety which leads him to accept the divine testimony as certain (21b6–7, *οὐ γὰρ δήπου ψεύδεταί γε· οὐ γὰρ θέμις αὐτῷ*), it is the indubitable testimony of self-awareness[22] which assures him that he is not in the least aware of being wise. The contradiction between these two unshakable testimonies – the 'riddle' (21b3–4) over which he long puzzles (21b7) – leads Socrates to open up an interior space of self-examination. 'What does the god mean?', he asks himself (21b3, cf. 5, 7). The question is directed both towards the god and towards himself, to the extent that in asking the meaning of the oracle he is questioning what he himself is. We must accept as a fact the antecedent occurrence of the oracle, without which there would have been no riddle. But it is Socrates' spontaneous act of questioning it which makes it into a riddle and thereby, so to speak, minimizes the factual aspect of the oracle. (Because it is externally initiated, I would call this 'passive' spontaneity.) The riddle thus engendered has consequences of the utmost importance: 'After having been puzzled a long time thinking about what the god meant, I ultimately, though not without some reluctance, turned to the following inquiry' (21b7–9). This way of inquiry, I would claim, is nothing other than the philosophy of Socrates.

Second, the inquiry focuses on the problem of 'wisdom' or of 'being wise', raised not only by the oracle but also by the older accusers, who had said 'There is a certain

[20] This is most clearly expressed in Socrates' declaration that the widespread misrepresentation and enmity to which he is subject are rooted in enmity against a certain kind of human 'wisdom', in terms of which he is justly called 'wise' (20d6–9).

[21] I take *οὔτε μέγα οὔτε σμικρόν* as an emphatic total negation governing the whole sentence, not accusatives of respect qualifying *σοφὸς ὤν*. But the usual understanding of this phrase in the latter sense does not impair the force of my argument. The *TLG* supplies nine other examples of this phrase and its variants (*οὔτε μέγα οὔτε μικρόν, οὔτε τι σμικρὸν οὔτε μέγα, μήτε μέγα μήτε σμικρόν*) in the Platonic corpus, in all of which it functions as a total negation and qualifies the verb: *Apol.* 19c4–5, 24a5, 26b1, *Phil.* 21e1, 32e6–7, 33b3, *Laws* VII 793c7, X 900e7, *Epist.* VII 349b5–6.

[22] *σύνοιδα ἐμαυτῷ* used with participle sustains the gravity of this important passage by revealing Socrates' firm internal awareness of his not being wise, in sharp contrast to the oracle's pronouncement. On this verb and its later history, see further H. R. Schwyzer, '"Bewusst und unbewusst" bei Plotin', *Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique* 5 (1960), 343–78.

Socrates, a wise man...' (18b6–7). 'Wise' (σοφός) can be used with an accusative of respect to denote expertise within a specific sphere of knowledge, e.g. medicine, architecture. But used without qualification it denotes an all-round perfection of the cognitive state which characterizes a person's entire being – in short, the virtue of 'wisdom' (σοφία).[23] It is this latter kind of wisdom and knowledge that is at issue in the *Apology*.

Admittedly a restriction of scope does appear to creep in at 21d3–4, '...for probably neither of us knows *anything fine and good* (οὐδὲν καλὸν κἀγαθὸν εἰδέναι)', and at 22d6–8, '...because they [the craftsmen] practised their own arts well, each deemed himself very wise in other things, *things of great importance* (τἆλλα τὰ μέγιστα σοφώτατος εἶναι)', but neither of these apparent qualifications in fact restricts the scope of the knowledge in question to any specific field or fields of expertise: on the contrary, both strongly suggest that the kind of understanding at issue is the broad kind. Indeed, in the second passage (see 22c9–e1) he has mentioned the 'wisdom' of the craftsmen in their own special sphere of expertise, but only to belittle it, as blinding them to their deficiency in the kind of wisdom that matters most. Thus throughout the *Apology* knowledge and ignorance are considered only with respect to their subject's possession or lack of the virtue wisdom, and to his self-awareness in this regard. The objects of knowledge are not treated as a matter of interest in their own right. This attitude, so characteristic of Socrates' philosophy in the *Apology*, is typified at 22e1–5: having confronted himself with the question whether he would rather be as he is, with neither the craftsmen's wisdom nor their folly, or choose rather to have both their wisdom and their folly, he answers, both for himself and for the oracle, that he would do better to stay as he is.

Third, did Socrates really set out to prove the oracle wrong? So he says (21b9–c2), but he cannot intend the claim to be taken at face value, since he was certain from the outset that the oracle was not lying (cf. 21b6). Rather, we should suppose, his systematic testing of the oracle was a device of his own invention,[24] comparable to Descartes' *doute méthodique*. We know not only how the inquiry proceeded, but also the end to which it led: the truth of the oracle was proven, and the evidence of Socrates' self-awareness confirmed. The two testimonies which had been in such sharp conflict at the outset were thereby brought into harmony. In confirming his self-awareness that he is not in the least aware of being wise, he establishes the truth of the oracle that there is no one wiser than Socrates. The key to this reconciliation is the possibility of achieving 'human wisdom' (20d8), the awareness of one's own ignorance. The mission assigned to Socrates by the god is to bring this truth into the view of the Athenian public. And that is the philosophy of Socrates, as conceived by Plato.

Fourth, the oracle's words, that *no one is wiser* than Socrates (21a6–7), led Socrates to constant self-comparisons with anyone judged wise, whether by others or by

[23] On the function of virtue, which constitutes one's being how one *is*, in Plato's earlier dialogues, cf. M. F. Burnyeat's excellent paper, 'Virtues in Action', in Vlastos (ed.), op. cit. (n. 3), pp. 209–34.

[24] The image of Socrates, who is never defeated by an impasse but always finds a way out, is reminiscent of Eros in *Smp.*, who 'always dwelling in deficiency...always contrives some devices' (203d3–6). It is explained that Eros possesses deficiency and device as the two constituents of his nature. So it would be mistaken to imagine that Plato here conceives the process of acquiring knowledge as a transition from ignorance, i.e. from deficiency of knowledge to possession of it. That Eros, the personification of the philosopher, is between the wise and the ignorant (204b1–c6) also suggests a different moral. At the summit of Diotima's story of mysteries, acquisition of knowledge is explained as the process of begetting true virtue (212a2–7).

themselves. As result, the prompting of the oracle opened up not merely an interior space for reflection within Socrates, as we have seen, but also a public space for confrontation between Socrates and others. It was in this space that a radical separation of Socrates' circle, the few, from those who opposed him, the many, was brought about by his examination of others in regard of truth and falsity. That separation is in evidence from the opening of Socrates' speech, with the address to the many, 'Gentlemen of Athens', right down to the moving words he speaks at the end to his close associates, telling them that the outcome is good and that there is no evil for a good man either in life or after death (39e1–42a5).

## 4. *Conclusion*

Socrates' argument against Meletus has shown that Meletus and his associates are not really concerned with the matters on which their accusation is focused. True piety consists not, as Meletus supposes, in the outward observance of the civic cult, but in internal belief in the gods' existence. And it is on the teaching of this piety that the proper education of the youth depends. Socrates' main defence has shown that man's correct attitude to god consists in recognizing the difference between divine and human wisdom, and in understanding how to maintain human wisdom on the path of philosophy, to do which is true piety. This is the way Socrates defended himself, and this is how Plato understands the true meaning of Socrates' life and death. I believe that the whole development of Plato's philosophy was built upon this foundation.[25]

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[25] This is a revised version of a paper first read to the B Club at the University of Cambridge on 20 November 1989, and then to a meeting of the Liverpool/Manchester group for Ancient Philosophy on 5 December 1989. A later version was delivered as an invited address to the 65th annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division, at San Francisco on 30 March 1991. I owe much to the discussions at these meetings, and to the helpful criticisms of a number of friends, colleagues and auditors, in particular Myles Burnyeat, Geoffrey Lloyd, G. B. Kerferd, Henry Blumenthal, Julius Moravcsik, Gerry Santas, John Ackrill, and the Editors of *CQ*, who also kindly improved my English. While I was preparing this final draft, Gregory Vlastos' book, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge, 1991) appeared. I am pleased to find in it views more akin to my own than in his previous papers. Although the view which I propose in this paper is different from his, I have long been encouraged and stimulated by his love for the Socrates of Plato's earlier dialogues and by his pioneering papers in this field.