

The Gadfly of Athens

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After the Thirty Tyrants were got out of the way, the Athenians had to blame someone for their defeat. It was not, of course, possible that they were at fault themselves. Perhaps the most enticing victim was the old philosopher Socrates, whom we've mentioned a couple of times already. To a large segment of the community he came across as a long-haired, bleeding-heart, pinko-faggot-hippie-atheist, and it was more or less on those charges that he was brought up before the Assembly.

Law courts in Athens were usually made up of 501 jurors, chosen by lot from the Ekklesia members. There was no judge or prosecutor, and all cases were handled more or less like civil suits. If someone killed your brother, for instance, you would sue him for murder. In accordance with Athenian democratic principles, you couldn't hire a lawyer to speak for you. Everyone had to speak for himself, though it was common practice to hire a speech maker and then try to memorize his masterpiece.

The trial against Socrates was held in 400 BC. Socrates, as you'll see, was rather like Jesus, not only in his world view, but also in the fact that he never wrote a book. His pupil Plato, however, used Socrates as the principal speaker in most of his philosophical works. Plato, who for my money was the greatest philosopher the world has produced, didn't usually write long essays after the manner of most philosophers. Instead he wrote plays, called dialogues, in which the plot was always a question like "What is love?" or "What is justice?" Plato, who was certainly at the trial, wrote out a version of Socrates' speech in his own defense. How far this reproduces what the real Socrates actually said is a question no one can answer. After our dreary look at the wars of Greece, however, it does present beautifully the other side of the Athenian mind. For, if Athens killed Socrates, it was also Athens who produced him. "Each man kills the thing he loves."

Apology¹

I do not know, fellow citizens, how you have been affected by my accusers. They have spoken so persuasively that I have nearly forgotten myself! And yet they have spoken scarcely one word of the truth. Of all their lies, however, I was especially amazed that you were warned to beware my clever speaking. Such shameless disregard of contradiction is especially shameful since I will be seen not at all to speak cleverly—unless by "speaking cleverly" they mean "speaking the truth." If that's what they mean, then I would agree to be an orator—but not like them. Anyway, as I said, though they have spoken little or nothing truthfully, you will hear me speak nothing but the whole truth. Consider carefully and attend to whether I speak justly or not. For that is the duty of a judge, just as speaking the truth is the duty of an orator.

First then, fellow citizens, I have the right to defend myself against the lies of my first accusers, and only then against the lies of my later ones. For I have had many accusers for many years now. They have spoken nothing truthful, but I fear them more than I do Anytus and his cronies, fearful though they are. But those earlier accusers are more fearful still. They have taken you under their wing since your early childhood, they have spread lies about me, and they have won you over. Let us

¹My translation and abridgement of Plato's *Apology*. The text is about one half the length of the original, the major omission being Socrates' interrogation of Meletus (24D-27E).

therefore take up our investigation from the beginning: What exactly is the source of this prejudice by means of which Meletus has indicted me? What exactly is their slander? We must examine their indictment as if they were my formal accusers: "Socrates is an evil man. He goes about performing subterranean and heavenly investigations, making the worse argument seem the better and teaching these very things to others." Something like that.

But I don't care about such things, fellow citizens. I call upon many of you as my witnesses, and I ask you to enquire of each other if anyone has ever heard me discuss such matters. Many of you can help me here: Ask each other if you have ever heard me discuss such topics, either briefly or at length. See for yourselves how ridiculous these accusations are!

Now one of you might well answer back: "But, Socrates, what is really going on here? Where have these prejudices come from? How could these rumors and stories have started unless you had acted strangely and lived differently from other men? Tell us what it is so that we don't jump to conclusions."

That seems a fair question, and I will try to explain the origin of my reputation and of this prejudice against me. Listen then. Perhaps I will seem to be joking, but I am telling you the whole truth. Fellow citizens, I have earned my reputation from nothing else than a certain kind of wisdom.

Don't shout me down, fellow citizens, even if I seem to be boasting! For I shall not bear witness myself but will appeal to a formidable authority. For as witness of my wisdom, if indeed it is wisdom at all, I shall call the God of Delphi. Now I imagine you all knew Chaerephon. He was my friend since childhood and a friend to most of you. He fled into exile with you and with you he returned. And you know the kind of man Chaerephon was, how impulsively he rushed into everything. Well, once when he went to Delphi he had the effrontery to ask the priestess this question. And whatever I say, don't shout me down, fellow citizens! For he asked if anyone was wiser than me. And the Pythian answered that no one was wiser. And his brother will bear witness to you about these things since Chaerephon is dead.

After I'd heard the oracle, I thought to myself: "What is the God saying, and what can He mean? For I certainly know that I am not wise—not by any measure! Then what in the world does the God mean by saying that I'm the wisest of all? For He certainly isn't lying. It would be against His nature." For a long time I couldn't figure out what the God meant. Finally, after a long struggle, I hit upon the following procedure.

I went to one of those with a reputation for wisdom, thinking that there, if anywhere, I could disprove the oracle. I could then point out to the prophet, "This man is wiser than me, but you said I was wisest of all!" After I examined this man—and I don't have to tell you his name, fellow citizens, except that he was a politician—and talked with him, I saw that he indeed appeared to be wise to many other men and especially to himself, but that he was not. I then attempted to point out to him that he only seemed to be wise, and as a result I became hateful to him and to many of those present. As I left I thought to myself that I am wiser than this man. Neither of us has ever had a noble or beautiful thought in his head, but he thinks he is wise when he is not, while I, who am not wise, do not think that I am. Then I went to another who was reputed to be even wiser than the first, and the result seemed to me the same. And I became hateful to him and to many others.

And by the dog, fellow citizens—for I must tell you the truth—this is what I found: It seemed to me, as I set upon my divinely ordained quest, that those who were best thought of were the most wanting, while others who seemed more lowly were far more prudent.

After the politicians I went to the poets, to those who write tragedies, and dithyrambs, and the rest, thinking that I would most certainly find myself more ignorant than they. Taking up those of their poems which seemed most carefully worked over, I would ask them for an interpretation, hoping that I might thus learn something. Gentlemen, I am ashamed to tell you the truth, but I must. In a word, almost any bystander could have spoken better about the very works the poets themselves had created. So I quickly learned this about the poets, that they do not do what they do out of wis-

dom, but rather by grace of nature and through a trance, just like seers and oracles. For these also say many beautiful things, but they don't understand what they say. So I left them thinking that I was their superior just as I was the politicians'.

Finally I went to the skilled workers. For though I realized (to put it bluntly) that I knew nothing, I would certainly discover that they knew many wonderful things. And in this I was not mistaken, for they knew things that I didn't, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, fellow citizens, they seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets and the politicians. Because he had mastered his own trade, each one thought that he was quite capable of governing the state, and that discord soured his wisdom, so that (with the oracle's guidance) I asked myself whether, given the choice, I should be exactly as I am, neither wise in their wisdom nor ignorant in their ignorance, or if I should have both the qualities they possessed. And I decided, both on my behalf and on the oracle's, to be just as I am.

My quest has engendered very troublesome and grievous hatreds, my fellow citizens, from which have resulted many slanders, but especially that label of "wise." For bystanders frequently assume that I am wise in those very matters in which I refute others. But in fact, gentlemen, only the God is wise, and what He means by the oracle is that human wisdom is worth little or nothing. And the God seems to have said Socrates because he needed my name as an example, as if He were to say, "He among you, O humans, is the wisest who realizes, just as Socrates does, that he is truly worthless as far as wisdom is concerned."

Moreover, the young men who have the inclination and the leisure to follow me about, and who are the sons of wealthy men, enjoy listening to me question people, and they often imitate me and then take up questioning others themselves. And then those who have been questioned by them get angry at me rather than at themselves, and they say that this fellow Socrates is a disgrace and is corrupting the young. And if someone asks them what he does and what he teaches, they have nothing to say and they don't know, but so that they won't seem at a loss they make the usual accusations leveled against philosophers—the old "celestial this, subterranean that, denies the gods, makes the worse argument better." For they wouldn't want to tell the truth, I imagine, which is that they have been caught faking wisdom while knowing nothing.

Perhaps someone might say, "Are you not ashamed, Socrates, to be so carrying on that you are now in imminent danger of death?" I would make him the just reproach: "You do not speak well, sir, if you think it profits a man to calculate the risks of life or death when he acts rather than to consider the consequences of justice and injustice, and to ponder whether his actions make him noble or base. For by your reckoning the demigods who died at Troy would be vulgar, even the son of Thetis, who despised danger when the alternative was shameful survival. As I remember it, his mother, a goddess, spoke to him as follows when he plotted the death of Hector: 'O my son, if you avenge the death of your friend Patroclus and kill Hector, you will perish. Your destiny is linked to Hector's death.' In response he belittled his death and the danger, fearing much more to live a coward and not to avenge his friend. 'Let me die at once,' he said, 'when I have punished the sinner so that I do not remain here a laughing stock by the strong beaked ships and a dead weight upon the earth.' Do you think he considered death or danger?"

This is how it is, fellow citizens: Wherever a man has stationed himself—either of his own volition or by the order of his commander—there, it seems to me, he should remain and face danger without worrying about death or anything else except disgrace.

My fellow citizens, it would be a grave crime for me to desert my post at this late date. Back when the generals whom you appointed stationed me at Potidaea and at Amphipolis and at Delium, I stood firm and risked death just like everyone else. Now that the God has ordered me, as I believe, to live as a philosopher and to question myself and others, now, in fear of death or some other such thing, shall I desert my post? That would really be terrible! Then someone could truly and justly indict me for not believing in the Gods, for disobeying the oracle and fearing death and thinking I

was wise when I was not.

If after all this you tell me, "Socrates, we will let you go on this condition, that you no longer waste your time in this investigation of yours or in philosophy. But if you keep on doing it, you will die." If, as I've said, you would let me go on these conditions, I would say to you, my fellow citizens, that I respect you and love you, but that I shall obey the God rather than you, and that as long as I have the breath and the strength, I shall not stop philosophizing and advising you and pointing out to you whenever we happen to meet, as has been my custom: "Most worthy fellow—Athenian, of course!—inhabitant of a city great and renowned for wisdom and strength, aren't you ashamed to care for the accumulation of money and glory and honor, and not to care for prudence and truth and the improvement of your soul?"

You know very well that the God has ordered me to do these things, and I believe that no greater good has ever come to the city than my service to the God. For I do nothing else than go around persuading you, young and old alike, not to bother about your bodies or your money, but rather to care about the excellence of your souls, saying that virtue doesn't come from money, but that both in private and in public life money and other good things come to men from virtue. If I indeed corrupt the youth by saying these words, then I suppose these words are harmful. But if anyone says that I say anything else, he doesn't know what he's talking about. My fellow citizens, whether you are persuaded by Anytus or not, and whether you let me go or not, I shall not act otherwise, even if I must die many times.

Don't shout me down, fellow citizens, but remember what I asked you, not to shout down my words, but to listen. For I really believe that your attention will do you good. I'm going to say things that may well make you shout, but don't do that. For know well that if you kill me, being such as I am, you will harm yourselves more than me. For if you kill me you won't easily find another to cling to the city just the way—to use a silly figure of speech—a horse fly clings to a well bred but rather fat and lazy horse that needs to be stung awake now and then. It seems to me that the God has assigned me as such to the city, so that all day long I might alight on each of you to stir you up, and persuade you, and scold you. There won't be another like me any time soon, gentlemen, so you really should be persuaded to spare me. Now I suppose that just like fellows who are annoyed because their nap has been disturbed, you could easily slap me to death and then snooze away the rest of your lives—unless the God sends you another to wake you up.

You can easily recognize the fact that I have been given to the city by the God, for it certainly isn't human nature for me to have neglected my own affairs all these many years and always to attend to your business, approaching each of you one by one just like a father or an elder brother, and persuading you to think about virtue. If I had made any profit from all the advice I've given, all this might make some sense. But you yourselves can see that though my accusers have been sufficiently shameless to accuse me of everything else, they haven't been quite shameless enough to summon witnesses of my having ever charged or received a fee. Anyway, I think I have witness enough of my truthfulness in my poverty.

Perhaps it might seem strange that although I go about giving advice and meddling in other people's business, I have not dared to come before the People and advise the city. You have often heard me speak of the reason for this. It is my guardian spirit. I've had this sort of inner voice ever since childhood. Whenever I hear it, it turns me away from what I'm about to do, but it never urges me on. It is this voice which dissuades me from politics, and I think it does well to do so. For you know well, my fellow citizens, that had I engaged in politics I would have perished long ago without doing either you or me any good.

Indeed, my fellow citizens, the only office I ever held in the state was to serve on the Council of 500. And my tribe Antiochis just happened to hold the chairmanship when you wished to judge together the ten generals, you know, the one who didn't rescue the survivors from the sea battle—quite illegally, as you later came to realize. I alone of the chairmen opposed your illegal actions,

and even though the prosecutors were ready to indict me and lead me off, and even though you were urging them to do so, I thought it preferable to endanger myself on the side of law and justice than to side with your unjust wishes just because I feared death or imprisonment. And all this happened when the city was still a democracy.

But when the oligarchy came to power, the Thirty in their turn summoned me and four others to the Rotunda to deliver up from Salamis Leon the Salaminian so that they could kill him. They often gave such orders so as to implicate as many as possible in their crimes. When we left the Rotunda the other four went to Salamis and delivered up Leon, but I went home. And I suppose I would have died in consequence if the government hadn't quickly returned. And you will have many witnesses of these events.

Well, so be it, gentlemen. This is pretty much what I have to say in my defense. Perhaps some of you might be annoyed with me, remembering how you yourselves, in the face of much less serious charges than this one, were afraid and tried to win over the judges with tears, bringing up your children, relatives, and friends so as to arouse as much pity as possible. I on the other hand will do no such thing despite facing what is, I suppose, the ultimate danger.

Why, then, will I do none of these things? It is not because I am stubborn, my fellow citizens, or because I hold you in poor regard. It is, of course, quite another matter whether or not I can face death courageously, but as for my reputation and yours and the reputation of the city, well, I don't think it would be good for me to do any of those things, certainly not at my age and given the reputation—deserved or not!—which I have. For people have come to think that Socrates is in some way different from most men. I have often seen some very famous people acting most outrageously when they were condemned, supposing that they were suffering something terrible in death, as if they would be immortal if you didn't kill them!

But apart from the question of reputation, gentlemen, I don't think it is just to entreat a judge or thus to escape his judgement. One should rather instruct and persuade him. For a judge does not sit to do favors, but rather to do justice. For surely, if by my begging I forced you to break your oaths, I would be teaching you that the Gods do not exist, and arguing most unskillfully I would convict myself of not believing in the Gods. But they must exist, my fellow citizens, and I believe in them more than do any of my accusers. And now I hand over to you and to the God the judgement of my case, as will be best both for me and for you.²

There are many reasons why your condemnation does not upset me, fellow citizens. What has happened was not unexpected, but I am amazed at the number of votes on either side. For I had expected to lose not by a little, but by a lot. Apparently, though, if only 30 votes had fallen the other way, I would have been acquitted.

Well, the man suggests the death penalty. So be it. And what shall I suggest to you, fellow citizens, as an alternate penalty? Clearly something suitable. What, then? What should I suffer or pay for not having spent my life in leisure, but rather for neglecting what other men value—profits and finances and generalships and rabble rousing and all the other offices, factions, and parties in the city? Thinking myself above being saved by such means, which would have benefited neither you nor me, I turned to providing each of you individually with what I would call the greatest benefit, trying to persuade you not to care for your property more than for your excellence and wisdom, nor to care for the wealth of the city more than for the city itself, and to think of other things in the same way. Well, what do I deserve for behaving this way? Something good my fellow citizens, if indeed a man should truly be rewarded according to his worth, and something good that would be especially suitable for me.

²The vote against Socrates was 281 to 220.

Well, what is suitable for a poor man who has richly served the state and who needs to have free time for your improvement? Nothing would be more appropriate for such a man, my fellow citizens, than to give him free meals in the State Cafeteria. He certainly would deserve it more than one of you who won the horse race at the Olympics. For the athlete makes you seem happy, but I make you really so. And he doesn't need welfare, but I do. So, if I am to be justly punished in accordance with my worth, then I should be provided with free meals in the State Cafeteria.

Perhaps in speaking this way I seem to you to be acting stubbornly, as when I talked about prayers and entreaties. That is not the case, my fellow citizens. Rather, I am persuaded that I have never harmed any man, but I shall not persuade you of this. For there is too little time for us to talk with each other.

Perhaps someone will say: "Socrates, if you keep quiet and hold your peace, could you not live on in exile?" It is most difficult of all to persuade some of you about this. For if I tell you that this would be to disobey the God and for that reason I can't hold my peace, you will not believe that I am telling the truth. Furthermore, if I say that this is the greatest good for a man, to speak about virtue every day and about all the other things you hear me discussing, and to examine myself and others, and that the unexamined life is not worth living—well, you will believe me even less. But these things are so, gentlemen, exactly as I say. It just isn't easy to persuade you. And besides, I am not accustomed to think myself worthy of any harm. If I had money, I would pay as large a monetary fine as I could afford. For that wouldn't harm me. But as it is, I am broke—unless you would be willing to charge me only so great a fine as I could afford. I could perhaps pay you one mina of silver, and I propose that much. But Plato, my fellow citizens, and Crito and Critobulus and Apollodorus tell me to propose a fine of 30 minae, and they pledge themselves as security. So I propose that much, and they will be your security for the money.³

My fellow citizens, for a short respite you will gain a bad reputation from those who would revile the state. They will say that you killed Socrates, a wise man. For in their desire to blame you, they will say that I am wise, even though I am not. If you had waited just a little while, all this would have happened by itself, for you see that I am already advanced in years and close to death. I do not say this to all of you, but to those of you who voted for my death. And to them I say this as well. Perhaps you think, gentlemen, that I have lost for want of arguments sufficient to persuade you, if indeed I thought that one should do or say anything to escape judgement. Far from it. In every danger there are many means of fleeing death, if one is willing to do or say anything. No, gentlemen, it is not at all difficult to flee death, but it is much more difficult to flee sin, for sin runs more swiftly than death. And now I, being slow and old, have been caught by the slower runner, and my formidable and swift accusers have been caught by the swifter runner, evil. And now I go away, condemned by you to death, but they have been convicted by truth of foulness and injustice. I have my penalty, and they have theirs. Perhaps these things are as they should be, and I think they have turned out well.

With those of you who voted for my acquittal I would like to talk about what has happened while the officials are busy and until I go to the place where I must die. An amazing thing has happened to me, my judges—for I may rightly call you judges. In past times the customary, mantic voice of my guardian spirit has always stood close by me and has always opposed me, even in trivial matters, when I was about to act wrongly. But now, when—as you yourselves can see—I am suffering what anyone would consider the greatest of evils, the signal from the God has not opposed me, not when I left home this morning, nor when I entered the court of justice, nor when I was about to say anything in my speech. In other conversations, however, the voice has cut me off just as I was

³This time the vote was 360 to 141 against Socrates.

about to speak. But now, throughout this entire proceeding, it has opposed me neither in word nor in deed. What shall I take to be the reason? I will tell you. What has happened is apparently a good thing and is not what we suppose, who think that dying is an evil. And this has been a sure sign to me, for my usual signal would not have failed to oppose me if I were not about to do something good.

And apart from this, we may even hope that death is a Good. For death is one of two things. Either to be dead is as to be nothing, or in accordance with legend it is a kind of change, a transfer of the soul from here to some other place. And if death is void of perception and is like a sleep during which we neither dream nor see anything, then it would be a wondrous boon. For I think that if someone were to isolate that one evening during which he slept so soundly that he didn't dream, and were then to compare it to all the other days and nights of his life and decide if any of them were better or sweeter than that one, well I don't think any private citizen—no, I don't think even the Great King himself—could reckon up any day or night superior to that one, dreamless sleep. If death is like that, I call it a boon. For then all time appears to be no more than one night.

But if death is like a journey from here to another place, and the legends are true that all who have died are there, what greater good than this could it be, my judges? For if one arrived in Hades, free at last from these so-called judges, to face the true judges who are said to sit there—Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus and all the other demigods who led just lives—would not the burden of such a journey be light? What would you not pay to be in the company of Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer? I would be willing to die many times if these things were true. It would be wonderful to meet with Palamedes and Telemonian Ajax and others of the old time who died unjustly. It would not be unpleasant, I imagine, to compare my experiences with theirs. And best of all, imagine examining and questioning those down there, just as I do with those here, to find out who is wise, and who thinks he is but is not. What would you not pay, my judges, to debate with the man who led the great army against Troy, or with Odysseus, or Sisyphus, or with so many other men and women we could name? What pleasure could be greater? At least they don't kill you for it down there! For they are not only more blessed than we are, but they are also immortal for all time, if indeed what is said is true.

My judges, you must be hopeful in the face of death and realize this one truth, that no evil comes to a good man, either in life or death, nor are the Gods unmindful of his sorrows. Nor have mine befallen me needlessly, but it is clear to me that it is better now to die and to be released from my troubles. It was for this reason that my guardian signal never deflected my course, and I am not at all angry with those who voted against me, nor with my accusers. And yet it was not for this reason that they voted against me and prosecuted me, but rather because they thought to do me harm. And for that they should be blamed.

Still, I ask them the following favor. When my sons grow up, if they seem to care for money or for anything else more than for virtue, make them pay for all the suffering I inflicted upon you, and reproach them, as I have you, if they act like something when they are worthless. If you do these things, I and my sons will have received justice at your hands.

But it is now time to go, I to die, and you to live. And which of us travels upon the better path is unclear to all, except to the God.