

## Understanding the Athenian Fear of Socrates: A Reading of Plato's *Apology* of Socrates *William P. Kiblinger*

Who was Socrates? Was he a sincere student or a sincere skeptic? Or was he sly and disingenuous? Or perhaps he was none of these, but more of a religious saint. Whatever the answer (if such a thing is finally possible), one thing is for sure: one must assess Socrates' use of irony and how it complicates his skepticism. Does he merely pretend not to know while in fact holding the position of an ethical cognitivist? Or are his claims of doubt genuine? In the end, one must judge just what Socrates was attempting to do with his life: as he himself asks, what exactly was his *pragma*? [task - Ed] The answer to this question could potentially explain why the Athenians feared him and his way of life.

In this essay, I argue that Socrates' skepticism is genuine and not the disingenuous product of irony. I claim that this skepticism, therefore, presents a real threat to Athenian traditions and indeed to all unreflective ways of life. This genuine skepticism consequently renders inapplicable the modern notion of ethical cognitivism as a description of Socrates' position (though non-cognitivism also misses the mark). In the end, Socrates' peculiar mix of traditional religious thought with ethical skepticism makes him the scapegoat for a society with a deep-seated anxiety that derives from two conflicting needs: (i) the need to participate within a tradition whose idealized form depicts a permanent destiny for the state, and (ii) the need to establish individual identity through the dynamic creation of norms as expressions of human freedom.

To begin with, let's take the advice of Proclus and the subsequent recommendation of Myles Burnyeat and consider the first words of the *Apology of Socrates* in order to meditate on their significance for the whole dialogue.<sup>1</sup> I wager that this exercise will dispel many of the uncharitable interpretations of Socrates' speech by those who find reason from the *prooimion* (introduction) to cast aspersions upon him. In the first sentence, we find the words *ouk oida* ('I do not know'), and this mild disclaimer at the outset will turn out to be the linchpin of Socrates' whole argument, indeed of his whole life's work.

Critics frequently charge Socrates with irony, by which they mean *eironeia*, i.e., dissimulation, false pretence, or plain lying. This charge seems obvious to James Redfield presumably because of the apparent flagrancy of Socrates' lies. Thus, Redfield writes, 'When [Socrates] says he is not 'powerful' (*deinos*), he is, of course, lying; this is one of the most powerful and skillfully organized and orchestrated speeches ever composed.'<sup>2</sup> R. E. Allen makes the same point by calling attention to the vast disparity between Socrates' professed inability to speak eloquently and his actual display of rhetorical mastery.

Now there is no doubt about Socrates' skill in speaking. His brilliance depends on his deft ability to respond to unforeseen positions held by his interlocutors and to transform those opinions gradually through his elenctic method. Arguing by elenchos requires scrupulous attention to the statements of the other and precise rejoinders in crisp language. Naturally, Socrates is a skillful speaker. But is he a

clever (*deinos*) speaker? In this *prooimion*, Socrates is at pains to distinguish himself and his philosophical identity from the sophists and their reputation for rhetorical cleverness. As C. Reeve rightly points out, Socrates frequently denounces ‘clever speakers’ and attempts to differentiate himself from this group, but he never denies being a good, skillful, and even masterful speaker.<sup>3</sup> He can do so without contradiction or dissimulation because, as Brickhouse and Smith note, he is invoking a special sense of ‘clever,’ which refers specifically to the sophists who were well known for ‘making the weaker argument seem stronger.’<sup>4</sup> Socrates is not that sort of clever speaker for the simple reason that he tells the truth—or, at least, he reports his mental states truthfully.

One must distinguish truth from truthfulness. Socrates may possess true belief through divine dispensation, but he denies having any knowledge of the truth. That is, he denies having any *moral* knowledge that he has derived solely from human reason. Presumably, he possesses knowledge of ordinary facts, but this is not his concern when speaking of truth. It is moral knowledge that matters, and he denies any possession of it. Thus, he can only speak in good faith or bad. Like the ‘clever’ sophists, he can feign to know when he does not and speak cleverly when he should not, or he can openly admit that he does not know. The task of the jury, and ours as well, is to decide whether Socrates speaks truthfully.

Thus, the key to the defence is to prove that Socrates speaks truthfully, so that his honesty will differentiate his words from the clever speech of the sophists who feign to know. How then can we be certain that Socrates speaks truthfully? What evidence can we rely on to guarantee that he is sincerely reporting his mental contents? The first words give us the clue. The rest of the *Apology* explains the point. Socrates begins his entire defence by confessing, ‘I do not know.’ This confession becomes not only the centrepiece of his case in court but in fact, as we learn from his devotion to Apollo, the guiding principle of his entire life. If we can judge truthfulness only by the correspondence of one’s words with one’s actions, then we must decide whether Socrates did in fact live the life of one who neither knows nor bears the pretence of knowing. The entire defence rests on its ability to convince the jury (and us, the reading jury) that Socrates did live such a life. If he succeeds in this endeavour, then we cannot judge him to be lying when he distinguishes himself from all those ‘clever’ charlatans who feign knowledge.

If Socrates is not a clever charlatan, then indeed, Socrates, we do ask (as he rhetorically puts it in his own defence): ‘Who is Socrates, and what does he do?’ (*Apology*, 20c4-5). We ask this question over and over again, so much so that plausible justifications can be given for vastly different views. It seems that a hermeneutical dilemma occurs in which the reader inevitably becomes implicated in the reading. The meaning ‘behind’ the text does not appear without a layering of meaning ‘in front of’ the text. Certainly, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche allow their own views to radiate through the surface of their readings of Socrates but not in ways that are obviously inappropriate—assuming of course that one has abandoned the hope of ever retrieving the ‘real’ Socrates. Such a hope must be abandoned, as with all hopes based on confusion. So our question must not simply be about the ‘*pragma*’ (work, task, business) of Socrates, but the *pragma* of Socrates *for us*.

Sarah Kofman suggests that the variance among readings of Socrates depends on numerous prior interpretive choices, the presupposition of which reflects a desire (if unconscious) to guard the reader's certitudes from the destructive sweep of this 'atopical and atypical monster,' as Kofman puts it.<sup>5</sup> For example, one must choose which source to privilege among the three possibilities: Plato, Xenophon, or Aristophanes. One must also decide whether or not to read Socrates as ironic: if so, tragic or comic; if not, optimistic or pessimistic. Likewise, Socrates' ignorance must be evaluated as feigned or real, which will affect the way one conceives his method. And what of his *daimonion* [inner self - Ed] and its voice? It could speak for the Absolute Subjectivity of Geist, or it could be the dying gasps of a degenerate instinct as rationality gradually comes to prevail through the elenchos. How should we treat Socrates' place in history? In turning philosophy away from quasi-scientific investigations of nature toward human affairs and the care of the soul, does Socrates mark a decisive beginning, a turning point, or a failure and an ending? What of his political views? Is he, as Karl Popper suggests, a lover of freedom, a democrat and a humanitarian, who was betrayed by Plato's depiction of him as a totalitarian? Or conceivably he was truly anti-democratic, and thus his condemnation of Athens includes its constitution as well as its citizens. Perhaps, like W. K. C. Guthrie, we would prefer to carve out a view somewhere in the middle.<sup>6</sup> At the end of Kofman's account of these twisted readings of Socrates, she poses the following question: 'If the problem of Socrates has caused so much ink to flow, in the final analysis, is it not because behind the 'case' of this atopical and atypical monster, each interpreter is trying as he can to 'settle' his own 'case,' to carry out his reading in such a way that all of his own certitudes will not collapse with Socrates, that his own equilibrium and that of his 'system'—even if there is nothing obviously systematic about it—will not be too seriously threatened?'<sup>7</sup>

Yes. Readings of Socrates always reflect a defence mechanism of one sort or another in order to shield the reader from the threat of Socrates' skeptical scrutiny. So let me conclude this point by confessing my 'case' for a moment. As Brickhouse and Smith contend, Socrates' 'pragma' involves destructive, constructive, and hortative elements, but it is the destructive moment that is the most enticing and yet most threatening.<sup>8</sup> Let me explain. I agree with Gregory Vlastos that Socrates' 'royal art,' which aims at the perfection of the soul, is intended (*contra* Xenophon) to be a universal calling for all rational individuals who care to examine themselves. (I am not sure, however, whether Vlastos's notion of Socrates as 'searcher'<sup>9</sup> can fully account for his constructive side or his 'suffering' on behalf of the Athenians, but that is another story involving a further reading, which cannot delay us here.) I also agree with Brickhouse and Smith that the elenchos is not a craft but has universal applicability. This universality has two senses: the elenchos can be used by anyone, and it can be applied to any belief. Furthermore, Brickhouse and Smith make an important point in asserting that Socrates examines more than the consistency of a set of propositions or a set of beliefs, but rather a way of life. What then is so enticing and threatening about Socrates' destructive moment of skepticism? It promises to change anyone's life including my own, but my frail, neurotic 'system' may collapse in the process.

Thus far, the depiction of Socrates may strike some readers of the Platonic dialogues as out of step with the central thrust of this extraordinary philosopher. Surely, some readers would argue, Socrates only threatens beliefs and even ways of life insofar as

he possesses a rational method for arriving at universal and necessary ethical truth. The truth is indeed threatening to those who are attached to falsehoods, but it is also a source of hope since Socrates promises direct access to it.

My question for this section is the following: Is Socrates an ethical cognitivist? Does he provide a method for achieving this direct access to moral truth? The question admits of differing responses depending at least on the following: (i) who one takes the literary figure 'Socrates' to be, and (ii) the status of Socrates' *daimonion*. Vlastos argues that Socrates does not intend to deceive through his use of irony (*eironeia*), but that this literary figure employs the trope of irony to serve his maieutic goal. Thus, Vlastos contends that Socrates avoids literal language because of the nature of learning: 'if you are to come to the truth,' Vlastos writes, 'it must be by yourself for yourself.'<sup>10</sup> Then, we may ask, to what degree of irony does Socrates invoke his *daimonion*? The nature of this divine voice within him has to be explained in order to decide our question, because his 'serious' submission to this voice seems to present *a prima facie* reason to deny that Socrates is an ethical cognitivist. That is, if he is truly heeding the instruction of this heteronomous authority, then Socrates does not come to ethical truth by himself or solely for himself. I assert that Vlastos's interpretation of Socrates' irony and the view of Socrates as a religious devotee whose fate as a tragic hero verges on sainthood suggest two things: (i) that Socrates truthfully reports the proscriptions of his *daimonion*, and thus (ii) that his reliance on this voice in ethical matters reflects a noncognitivist ethical position.

First of all, the literary figure of 'Socrates' can be understood in many ways, but from among the literary options for assessing the status of this character allow me to select the tragic view of Socrates.<sup>11</sup> In this view, Plato, as a tragedian superior to all other tragedians, develops the literary figure of Socrates as a tragic hero whose plight is to suffer the slings and arrows of a populace that fails to honour or understand his religious mission. Here, I disagree with Kenneth Seeskin who contrasts Socrates to Oedipus by saying: 'Oedipus suffered greatly.... Whatever else Socrates does in the dialogues, he does not suffer.' True, Socrates sleeps like a baby in his prison cell while his friend Crito frets anxiously, but that scene occurs near the conclusion of Socrates' long and arduous journey in service of Apollo, at the end of which he might have said, 'My feet are tired, but my soul is rested.' Seeskin, however, does recognize the heroic nature of Socrates' tragic demise, and he correctly notes the religious aspect of Socrates' dedication to the pursuit of philosophy. Socrates could well be viewed in this light as the patron saint of the religious practice called 'moral philosophy.'

Given this hagiographic image of Socrates, the next point to examine is the specific role of his *daimonion* in the dialogues. Does Socrates really mean he hears a divine voice that holds him in check when he is on the verge of transgression? Through Vlastos's interpretation of Socratic irony and Seeskin's hagiographic depiction of the philosophizing zealot, it is not difficult to accept the possibility that Socrates truthfully describes his mental states when he refers to this divine voice. Once we have granted this possibility, Socrates' ethical cognitivism (as many philosophers view it) deserves critical scrutiny, because he relies, at least in part, on ethical assertions whose validity cannot be argued for or against. The *daimonion* functions as a sheer existential decision or emotivist intuition, and Socrates' insistent disavowal of moral knowledge denies him any metaphysical system within which such assertions

could be rationally described and justified. Thus, this interpretation of Socrates renders him an ethical non-cognitivist. Some qualification, however, deserves mention. First, the *daimonion* only proscribes, never prescribes. Thus, a positive principle of moral action, e.g., the virtue of benevolence, could be developed in conjunction with the non-cognitivist element. Secondly, the relation of faith and reason differed significantly in the ancient world from the modern view such that the very notion of cognitivism in that context would not have precluded religious revelation. Indeed, epistemology at that time was grounded on the twin pillars of sense-perception and religious inspiration, which together comprised the totality of reason. Perhaps, then, our initial question about cognitivism is simply anachronistic.

If cognitivism and non-cognitivism are not appropriate distinctions to make within the context of 5th century Athens, then, arguments to the contrary notwithstanding, Socrates does not represent a complete shift in ethics from an authoritarian religious basis to an autonomous form of thought based on an individual's reason. To be sure, there is some truth in that description, but the whole truth is more complicated. In this section, I would like to explore one way of accounting for the threatening shift that Socrates does represent without resorting to anachronistic terms like cognitivism.

In this vein, there are two aporiai arising from Socrates' ethical position that I would like to consider briefly. First, Socrates claims, on the one hand, that 'the bad harm those who are always nearest them' (*Apology* 25d8-10), while, on the other, he contends that Meletus and Anytus, who are morally reprehensible, cannot do him any harm because 'it is not allowed by the law of God for a better man to be harmed by a worse man' (30c8-d1). Unless Socrates intends to equivocate on the sense of harm in these passages, an aporia [objections] ensues and requires further explanation. Secondly, Socrates' rejection of retaliation (e.g., *Crito* 49cd), if taken as a universal principle for settling disputes, seems to stand in stark contrast to the typically Homeric code of ethics, which Socrates himself invokes when proudly recollecting his own military feats. In this case, his actions seem *prima facie* to contradict his stated beliefs, and this leads us to the second aporia. In the first case, the aporia seems to be internal to the concept of harm and thus to involve a logical contradiction. In the second case, the aporia arises because his actions appear to be at odds with his principle for action and therefore seem to involve a performative contradiction. I propose to solve these aporiai by asserting that Socrates' ethical position stands out from its contemporary context as radically different insofar as many fundamental ethical concepts (e.g., harm) take on new meanings in his thought, but his position, nevertheless, retains vestiges of the Homeric code and fails to universalize its principles completely.

In the first case, Socrates uses the concept 'harm' in the traditional sense when claiming that the evil person tends to harm those in close proximity, but he shifts the concept of harm to a radically different moral sense when asserting the principle that the worse man can never harm the better man (N.B., the terms 'worse' and 'better' have shifted in equivalent ways as well). When Socrates speaks of the traditional sort of harm, he means any sort of non-moral activity that may diminish one's happiness (e.g., physical harm, loss of wealth or honor, etc.). He accepts this definition for the sake of the elenchos because his opponent, Meletus, would likely subscribe to such a belief and could be refuted through its use. Later, however, when he speaks of his own beliefs, no longer in the elenchos, he explains that 'harm' has a moral sense

which by far outweighs its non-moral meaning. In this case, harm refers to any activity that diminishes one's virtue and adversely affects one's soul. Let's call this 'moral harm.' In his radically new moral principle, Socrates contends that no non-moral harm can do moral harm to a person. In this way, Socrates avoids logical contradiction by intentionally employing an equivocation of the term 'harm' (nonmoral versus moral) in order to establish a radically new ethical code.<sup>12</sup>

As for Socrates' apparent performative contradiction, the crucial factor involved in this aporia is the moral scope of his ethical position. To his credit, Socrates initiates a shift toward universal moral norms by rejecting the culturally circumscribed norms of the Homeric moral code, but his cosmopolitanism does not extend to all social inferiors such as women, aliens, and slaves.<sup>13</sup> In the Homeric code, moral obligation is never universal but always specific, i.e., based on social status and contingent circumstance. Socrates indeed extends moral obligation to non-Greek guests but not to all foreigners. Thus, the apparent performative contradiction is resolved by the fact that Socrates' ethical position does not have a truly universal moral scope though it is considerably wider than its Homeric predecessor. History must wait for many centuries before the truly deontological principles of Immanuel Kant are to arrive (though perhaps the relativism of Protagoras or the agapic message of Jesus—spread to the ends of the earth, as Luke writes—makes an earlier approximation of moral universalism).

Taking stock of where we have been so far, we have seen that we should take seriously Socrates' confession not to know the truth and his deference to the *daimonion* in matters of ethics rather than dismissing these claims as dissimulating irony. Furthermore, we have seen that his *pragma* of skeptical questioning potentially threatens everything we stand for and do. This threat, moreover, may be a threat to traditional religion and to tradition more generally, but it issues from within religion in such way that the modern distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism does not apply. In particular, Socrates threatens to transform traditional codes of conduct by reformulating concepts such as 'harm,' shedding some Homeric layers of meaning while retaining vestiges of them. Thus, Socrates' *pragma*, his life's work, appears to be dangerous to the Athenian way of life, and consequently their fear of him led to his trial, sentencing, and execution.

Our final question, then, is the following: Were the Athenian fears of Socrates justified? An adequate response to this question would involve the well-established distinction between fear and anxiety. Fear always relates to a particular object, whereas anxiety is perpetually indeterminate and free-floating. Insofar as Socrates becomes the object of the Athenian fears, we can ask whether his words and deeds merit his identification with this objective fear. For some scholars such as Vlastos, Socrates' moralistic conception of the gods reflects the erosion of traditional religious belief initiated by the 'nature-philosophers' of Ionia and pursued further by the Eleatics (beginning as much as 150 years before with Xenophanes' critique of polytheism and theological anthropomorphism).<sup>14</sup> Continuing this line of thought, Socrates effects an 'ethical transformation' of religious understanding, which is 'tantamount to the destruction of the old gods.'<sup>15</sup> Thus, the Athenian fear (a 'manifesto of orthodoxy,' as J. B. Bury describes it) was justified.<sup>16</sup> However, when Socrates asks Euthyphro incredulously whether he really believes the gods quarrel and are in enmity (i.e., whether they act immorally), Euthyphro replies affirmatively

but reports that whenever he speaks ‘about matters of religion . . . they [the Athenian Assembly] laugh at me as if I were a madman’ (*Euthyphro* 3c1-3). Since the tides already seemed to be turning against traditional religion among the general populace, other scholars such as Brickhouse and Smith argue that Socrates was not identified as the object of Athenian fears on account of his moral transformation of the gods because Socrates was simply not so revolutionary in this respect. Thus, the assertion that the Athenians identified Socrates as the object of their fears because of his unorthodox religious beliefs seems historically inaccurate since such apparently heterodox beliefs were in fact fairly ordinary. The Athenian fears, then, must have been more complicated and ambivalent, and they therefore require further explanation.

Complicated and ambivalent fears are fears whose particular object cannot fully determine their scope and power. In such cases, the fears are mere signs of a much greater anxiety, which in this case involves the interplay of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Despite W. H. Auden’s proclamation that the twentieth century inaugurated the age of anxiety, 5th century B.C.E. Athens seems to have experienced its own form of this epidemic. Shortly after the highly romanticized portrayal of Athens in Pericles’ Funeral Speech, Athens struggled with the interplay of conflicting value systems (roughly, as A. W. Adkins reports, competitive versus cooperative), and this conflict reflects the ever-present anxieties arising from the relations of identity and difference, individualism and participation, dynamics and form, freedom and destiny.<sup>17</sup> Adkins’s analysis of the term *nomoi* illustrates these anxieties insofar as its meaning spans ‘custom’ and ‘law’: in the case of custom, the term relates to the need for participation within a tradition whose idealized form depicts a permanent destiny for the state; in the case of law, the term invokes a drive towards individual identity through the dynamic creation of norms as expressions of human freedom.<sup>18</sup> In the aftermath of Pericles, the Athenians cannot simply repeat the past without compromising their future, nor can they simply press forward without forfeiting the past. When the notion of *nomoi* is thoroughly ambiguous, the question of justification according to the customs/laws has no unambiguous solution. Similarly, when the object of fear dissolves into the amorphous flow of anxiety, the evolution of a fear becomes the reification of anxiety in a sign. The question of justification, then, entails the recovery of the object that the sign represents, but if the content of a sign is precisely not an object then no object can be recovered. Thus, the fear cannot be so justified. In other words, Socrates becomes the objectified scapegoat of a collective anxiety, his condemnation functions as a free-floating sign with no objective referent, and thus its justification cannot be assessed.

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<sup>1</sup> Myles Burnyeat, ‘First Words,’ *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 1997, v. 43: 1-20.

<sup>2</sup> See the Note on the Translation in James Redfield’s *Plato’s Apology of Socrates*, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> C. Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology: An Essay on Plato’s Apology of Socrates* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), pp. 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Socrates on Trial* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Kofman, *Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher*, tr. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

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<sup>6</sup> 'These two polar opposites may serve to indicate the twisting and turning to which the evidence can be subjected.' W. K. C. Guthrie, *Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> Kofman, pp. 247-8.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 3-29.

<sup>9</sup> See Gregory Vlastos, 'The Paradox of Socrates' in *Studies in Greek Philosophy*, ed. Daniel W. Graham (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> I follow Alister Cameron on this view. See his *Plato's Affair with Tragedy* (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> This ethical view, however, does not entail the Identity Thesis, as Vlastos calls it, which simply equates virtue and happiness (or, more precisely, asserts that virtue is the only constituent of happiness). Indeed, Vlastos persuasively offers a 'multicomponent model of happiness' whereby Socrates can prefer to avoid non-moral harm while denying its adverse effects on the soul. For example, in the *Gorgias*, Polus asks if Socrates would wish to suffer injustice rather than do it, and Socrates replies: 'For my part I would wish neither. But if I were forced to choose between suffering injustice and doing it, I would choose to suffer it' (*Gorg.* 469b12-c2). (See Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, p. 227.) With this multicomponent model of happiness in mind, Vlastos's position can be reconciled with that of Brickhouse and Smith which asserts that virtue for Socrates is not necessary for happiness because virtue is viewed as only one of many constituents of happiness. Their positions differ, however, with respect to the sufficiency thesis which Brickhouse and Smith also deny, thereby denying that virtue is constitutive of happiness at all, but that is another story. (See Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, pp. 103-36, esp. p. 118.) In any case, the notion of harm has entered the moral realm through Socrates' ethical inquiry and can no longer simply apply to matters unrelated to the well-being (*eudaimonia*) of one's soul.

<sup>13</sup> *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, p. 179.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>16</sup> J. B. Bury, 'Socrates Not Unjustly Condemned,' *The Socratic Problem*, ed. M. Montuori (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1992), p. 222-3.

<sup>17</sup> A. W. Adkins, *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece: From Homer to the End of the Fifth Century* (New York: Norton and Company, Inc., 1972).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105-6.