

## PLATO From Apologia ca. 399 B.C.E.

Plato (427-347 B.C.E.), a classical Greek philosopher and founder of the Academy philosophical school, was a pupil of the philosopher Socrates (ca. 470-399 B.C.E.) and sought to preserve his mentors' contribution to Athenian life. As Socrates recorded nothing, we must rely on Plato's documentation of Socrates's teachings. In the following speech, Socrates presents his defense in Athenian court against the charges that he was impious and corrupted the youth. It is unclear to what extent the Apologia represents his actual words or merely Plato's reimagining of them. Although the exact date of the Apologia is unknown, Plato recorded this speech after Socrates's conviction and execution.

Men of Athens do not interrupt me with noise, even if I seem to you to be boasting, for the word that I speak is not mine, but the speaker to whom I shall refer it is a person of weight. For of my wisdom -if it is wisdom at all -and of its nature, I will offer you the god of Delphi<sup>7</sup> as a witness. You know Chaerephon, I fancy. He was my comrade from a youth and the comrade of your democratic party. <sup>8</sup> ... Well, once he went to Delphi and made so bold as to ask the oracle this question; and, gentlemen, don't make a disturbance at what I say, for he asked if there were anyone wiser than I. Now the Pythia<sup>9</sup> replied that there was no one wiser. And about these things, his brother here will bear you witness since Chaerephon is dead.

But see why I say these things, for I am going to tell you from where the prejudice against me has arisen. For when I heard this, I thought to myself: "What in the world does the god mean, and what riddle is he pro-pounding?<sup>10</sup> For I am conscious that I am not wise to any degree. What, then, does he mean by declaring that I am the wisest? He certainly cannot be lying, for that is not possible for him." And for a long time, I was at a loss as to what he meant; then, with great reluctance, I proceeded to investigate him somewhat as follows.

I went to one of those who had a reputation for wisdom, thinking that there, if anywhere, I should prove the utterance wrong and should show the oracle, "This man is wiser than I, but you said I was wisest." So, examining this man -for I need not call him by name, but it was one of the public men with regard to whom I had this kind of experience, men of Athens -and conversing with him, this man seemed to me to seem to be wise to many other people and especially to himself, but not to be so, and then I tried to show him that he thought he was wise but was not. As a result, I became hateful to him and to many of those present, and so, as I went away, I thought to myself, I am wiser than this man, for neither of us really knows anything fine and good, but this man thinks he knows some-thing when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either. I seem, then, in just this little thing to be wiser than this man at any rate, that what I do not know, I do not think I know either." From him, I went to another of those who were reputed to be wiser than he, and these same things seemed to me to be true, and there I became hateful both to him and to many others...

Now from this investigation, men of Athens, many enmities have arisen against me, and such as are most harsh and grievous, so that many prejudices have resulted from them and I am called a wise man. For on each occasion, those who are present think I am wise in the matters in which I confute someone else; but the fact is, gentlemen, it is likely that the god is really wise and by his oracle means this: "Human wisdom is of little or no value." And it appears that he does not really

say this of Socrates but merely uses my name and makes me an example, as if he were to say: "This one of you, O human beings, is wisest, who, like Socrates, recognizes that he is in truth of no account in respect to wisdom."

Therefore, I am still even now going about and searching and investigating at the god's behest anyone, whether citizen or foreigner, who I think is wise; and when he does not seem so to me, I give aid to the god and show that he is not wise. And by reason of this occupation, I have no leisure to attend to any of the affairs of the state worth mentioning or of my own but am in vast poverty on account of my service to the god.

And in addition to these things, the young men who have the most leisure, the sons of the richest men, accompany me of their own accord, find pleasure in hearing people being examined, and often imitate me themselves, and then they undertake to examine others; and then, I fancy, they find great plenty of people who think they know something, but know little or nothing. As a result, therefore, those who are examined by them are angry with me instead of being angry with themselves and say that "Socrates is a most abominable person and is corrupting the youth."

And when anyone asks them, "By doing or teaching what?" They have nothing to say, but they do not know, and they may not seem to be at a loss; they say these things that are handy to say against all the philosophers: "the things in the air and the things beneath the Earth " and "not to believe in the gods " and "to make the weaker argument, the stronger."

For they would not, I fancy, care to say the truth, that it is being made very clear that they pretend to know but know nothing .... If you should say to me ... "Socrates, this time we will not do as Anytus<sup>12</sup> says, but we will let you go, on this condition, however, that you no longer spend our time in this investigation or in philosophy ["love of wisdom"], and if you are caught doing so again you shall die"; if you should let me go on this condition which I have mentioned, I should say to you, "Men of Athens, I respect and love you, but I shall obey the god [Apollo] rather than you, and while I live and am able to continue, I shall never give up philosophy or stop exhorting you and pointing out the truth to any one of you whom I may meet, saying in my accustomed way: "Most excellent man, are you who are a citizen of Athens, the greatest of cities and the most famous for wisdom and power, not ashamed to care for the acquisition of wealth and for reputation and honor, when you neither care nor take thought for wisdom and truth and the perfection of your soul?" And if any of you argues the point and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once, nor shall I go away, but I shall question and examine and cross-examine him, and if I find that he does not possess virtue, but says he does, I shall rebuke him for scorning the things that are of most importance and caring more for what is of less worth. This I shall do to whomever I meet, young and old, foreigner and citizen, but most to the citizens, inasmuch as you are more nearly related to me.

For now that the god commands me to do this, and I believe that no greater good ever came to pass in the city than my service to the god. For I go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care for your persons or your property more than for the perfection of your souls, or even so much, and I tell you that virtue does not come from money, but from virtue comes money and all other good things to man, both to the individual and to the state. If by saying these things I corrupt the youth, these things must be injurious, but if anyone asserts that I say other things than these, he says what is untrue. Therefore, I say to you, men of Athens, either do

as Anytus tells you or not, and either acquit me or not, knowing that I shall not change my conduct even if I am to die many times over...

For now, that if you kill me, I am such a man as I say I am, you will not injure me so much as yourselves .... And so, men of Athens, I am now making my defense not for my own sake, as one might imagine, but far more for yours, that you may not by condemning me err in your treatment of the gift the god gave you. For if you put me to death, you will not easily find another, who, to use a rather absurd figure, attaches himself to the city as a gadfly to a horse, which, though large and well-bred, is slug-gish on account of his size and needs to be aroused by stinging. I think the god fastened me upon the city in some such capacity, and I go about arousing and urging and reproaching each one of you, constantly alight-ing upon you everywhere the whole day long. Such another is not likely to come to you, gentlemen, but if you take my advice, you will spare me. But you, perhaps, might be angry, like people awakened from a nap, and might slap me, as Anytus advises, and easily kill me; then you would pass the rest of your lives in slumber unless the god, in his care for you, should send someone else to sting you. And that I am, as I say, a kind of gift from the god, you might understand from this; for I have neglected all my own affairs and have been enduring the neglect of my concerns all these years, but I am always busy in your interest, coming to each one of you indi-vidually like a father or an elder brother and urging you to care for virtue; now that is not like human conduct. If I derived any profit from this and received pay for these exhortations, there would be some sense in it, but now you yourselves see that my accusers, though they accuse me of every-thing else in such a shameless way, have not been able to work themselves up to such a pitch of shamelessness as to produce a witness to testify that I ever exacted or asked pay of anyone. For I think I have a sufficient witness that I speak the truth, namely, my poverty...

I was never anyone's teacher. If anyone, whether young or old, wishes to hear me speaking and pursuing my mission, I have never objected, nor do I converse only when I am paid and not otherwise, but I offer myself alike to rich and poor; I ask questions, and whoever wishes may answer and hear what I say. And whether any of them turns out well or ill, I should not justly be held responsible, since I never promised or gave any instruc-tion to any of them;<sup>13</sup> but if any man says that he ever learned or heard anything privately from me, which all the others did not, be assured that he is lying.

But why, then, do some people love to spend much of their time with me? You have heard the reason, men of Athens, for I told you the whole truth; it is because they like to listen when those who think they are wise and are not so are examined, for it is amusing.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does Socrates defend himself against the charges of impiety and corrupting the youth? Do you find his argument convincing? Explain.
2. Socrates was convicted and later sentenced to death. Why might the Athenians have found him guilty?
3. How does Socrates define and seek wisdom?
4. What tactics did Socrates use to question people? Why might he have attracted so many followers? Conversely, what elements of Socrates's method might have created enemies?