The Review of Politics 70 (2008), 519–546.
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doi:10.1017/S0034670508000752 Printed in the USA

Plato's *Apology* as Tragedy

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Abstract: In this article, the work of the cultural historian Jean-Pierre Vernant and the philosophical anthropologist René Girard provides grounds for reflecting on Plato's adaptation of tragedy in the *Apology,* and in particular on Plato's implicit comparison of Socrates with the character of Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*. The *Apology* uses certain thematic and formal elements of tragedy – including systematic ambiguity, dramatic reversal and recognition, and the figure of a hero who is also a scapegoat – in order to expose the paradoxical combination of persuasion and compulsion at the heart of political life and of philosophical passion and aggression in the soul of the philosopher.

The composition of Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, which parallels the standard structure of Greek forensic oratory and incorporates the rhetorical *topoi* of the Athenian orators, has long been a subject of scholarly interest.[1] It was recognized some time ago that Socrates parodies courtroom oratory in a way that reverses its traditional function, employing it not for the sake of winning his case but in order to put the Athenian judges on trial.[2] Yet rhetoric is not the only form of public discourse Plato adapts for his own uses in the *Apology*. One scholar has helpfully proposed that "the *Apology* is a tragedy of philosophy as well as politics, or, more exactly, of the failed relationship between them."[3] But no one has to my knowledge concretely shown how the dialogue works as a tragic drama.

I would like to thank Stephen Gardner, Abraham Howland, Victor Udwin, Ruth Whitson, and audiences at Notre Dame and Baylor for fruitful discussions about the *Apology*. The *Review*'s anonymous referees improved this article immeasurably; I am solely responsible for its remaining faults.

[1]E. de Strycker incorporates and extends the reflections of Burnet and other scholars in S. R. Slings, ed., *Plato's Apology of Socrates: A Literary and Philosophical Study with a Running Commentary* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).

[2]Douglas D. Feaver and John E. Hare, "The *Apology* as an Inverted Parody of Rhetoric," *Arethusa* 14.2 (1981), 205–16. Cf. Slings, *Plato's Apology of Socrates*, 33: "Socratic speech always aims at truth. . . . [Socrates] is not primarily interested in securing his acquittal."

[3]J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 204.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670508000752 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A detailed reading of the *Apology* as tragedy would be of value not simply or primarily as a study of Plato's literary influences, but especially for the light it might shed on his understanding of the relationship between philosophy and politics.

In this essay I offer such a reading. I argue that the *Apology* uses certain thematic and formal elements of tragedy – including systematic ambiguity, tragic error, dramatic reversal and recognition, and the figure of a hero who is also a scapegoat or *pharmakos* – in order to expose the paradoxical combination of persuasion and compulsion at the heart of political life and of philosophical passion and aggression in the soul of the philosopher. On my reading, Plato's adaptation of tragedy in the *Apology* is complex and subtle. Although Socrates unearths tragic paradoxes that are intrinsic to the Athenian political community, he largely transcends tragedy himself. And while Socrates in important respects resembles a tragic hero on the model of Oedipus, the reader comes to recognize that it is the city of Athens (represented by the jury) that is the true tragic protagonist of the *Apology*.

I draw on the work of the cultural historian Jean-Pierre Vernant and the philosophical anthropologist René Girard in reflecting on the *Apology*'s affinities with Athenian tragic drama, and in particular on Plato's implicit comparison of Socrates with the character of Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*. By linking Socrates' courtroom drama with the tragedy of Oedipus, who in the readings of Vernant and Girard is simultaneously the savior of Thebes and the scapegoat who is made to bear the blame for the ills of the community, Plato is able to illuminate certain fundamental and perhaps irresolvable conflicts within and between philosophical natures and political communities. As a philosopher, Socrates is committed to the pursuit of truth and justice; as a political community, Athens finds it convenient to employ injustice and falsehood in order to secure civic unity. In the *Apology*, Socrates makes it clear that he understands his prosecution as a signal instance of the dynamic by which the city attempts to secure unanimity through the exercise of purifying violence against a sacrificial victim or *pharmakos*. Socrates' confrontation with the Athenians ends as expected, but this outcome is not entirely unwelcome to him. On one level, his death demonstrates his independence in the face of public shame and the threat of force – the means to which his accusers resort in order to silence him. On a deeper level, Socrates depends on shame and force to punish his accusers and to fashion his public image as a philosophical hero. Both the city and the philosopher are simultaneously victors and victims in the encounter Plato dramatizes in the *Apology*, and Socrates arguably bears some responsibility for the injustice he suffers. But the city alone commits tragic error, because only the city acts in ignorance. In convicting Socrates and sentencing him to death, it unknowingly plays a crucial role in a drama that Socrates has effectively scripted in advance.

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Tragedy and Tragic Education

My reading of the *Apology* as tragedy functions on two levels. On the first, more general level, the *Apology* affirms a conception of human existence that is broadly tragic, in the sense that it sees the life of human beings in a political community as being constituted and sustained by elements that stand in tension with one another in ways that admit of no permanent resolution. On the second, more specific level, the *Apology* is a drama that embodies the basic elements of tragedy identified by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, and that reflects the theme of sacrificial violence central to a number of tragedies, including Sophocles' *Oedipus*. Let us consider each level in turn.

The broadly tragic conception of human life identified above was institutionalized in the dramatic festivals of fifth-century Athens, which played a significant and complex role in Athenian civic education. While the Great Dionysia opened by ceremonially reconfirming and celebrating the power, wealth, and glory of Athens and its generous care for its citizens, the dramas performed in the precinct of Dionysus often raised critical questions about this "official" civic ideology and the foundations on which it rested.[4] Aeschylus's *Suppliants*, an early drama set in the mythical past of the newly-founded city of Argos, nicely illustrates the use of tragedy to explore the fundamental presuppositions and expose the enduring problems of political life in a way that highlights the difficult and perhaps insoluble character of these problems. The *Suppliants* invites us to regard the civilized existence of the *polis* as unfolding within a matrix of oppositions maintained by law, custom, ritual, and symbol – a social and political space that is opened up and structured by sharp distinctions between Greeks and barbarians, males and females, childhood and adulthood, the city and the family, public interest and private welfare, tyranny and the rule of law, persuasion and force. But in the *Suppliants*, whose action is tellingly situated in the ambiguous border-region between the cultivated land of Argos and the wild, these essential distinctions become dangerously blurred. Fifty maidens, Egyptian in birth, appearance, and understanding, seek refuge in Argos. Claiming to be Greeks on the

[4]Simon Goldhill, "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology," in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, ed. John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 97–129. There is some evidence that the tragedies were particularly directed toward an audience of *ephebes*, youths on the verge of manhood and the full responsibilities of citizenship; see John J. Winkler, "The Ephebes' Song: *Tragōidia* and Polis," in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?*, 20–62. Other scholars have argued that Aristotle valued tragedy primarily as a kind of adult education; see esp. Carnes Lord, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982). For further discussion of the nature and limits of tragic education, see my article "Aristotle on Tragedy: Rediscovering the *Poetics*," *Interpretation* 22.3 (1995), 359–403.

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basis of their descent from Io, the suppliants are fleeing from marriage to their Egyptian cousins, whom they portray as vicious barbarians. A family feud has thus become a grave public issue, and the confusion of categories impedes clear judgment: the suppliant maidens, after all, are no more or less Greeks than the cousins who pursue them. Much of the drama of this tragedy turns upon the struggle of King Pelasgos of Argos, a defender of law as the only bulwark against chaos, to reestablish the ordered oppositions upon which political life rests.

That the characteristically tragic perspective of the *Suppliants* could be echoed in the Platonic dialogues might at first seem doubtful, inasmuch as Socrates understands himself to be rejecting the metaphysical presuppositions of the poets in assuming an intrinsically intelligible order of stable, self-subsistent beings (*ideai*).[5] Yet because the order of being is – as Socrates repeatedly acknowledges – at least partially eclipsed in human existence, this philosophical assumption is compatible with a broadly tragic understanding of life (in the sense specified above). This tragic understanding is notably evident in the *Republic*, which focuses on the nature and consequences of the gap between the ordered realm of being and the disorder of human existence, particularly insofar as the disparity between these realms manifests itself in the vexed relationship between the philosopher and the city. Socrates makes it clear in this dialogue that the healthy city needs philosophy, so much so that, unless philosophers rule as kings, there will be "no cessation from ills for the cities" – yet he introduces this claim with hesitation, and Glaucon receives it with scorn.[6] In the *Republic*'s Cave Image, the philosopher who has managed to ascend to the sunlit uplands of what is looks back on the darkness of everyday human life with the characteristically tragic emotion of pity, while the cave-dwellers, for their part, can be expected to respond with lethal hostility to the returning philosopher's attempt to liberate them from the chains of ignorance (516c, 517a). In the *Apology*, which seems to fulfill precisely this dire expectation, the gap between human existence and the order of being is manifested in Socrates' assertion that his superior wisdom consists in his recognition of the human condition of

[5]Socrates affirms this assumption immediately before his trial and on the last day of his life; cf. *Euthphr.* 6d–e with *Phd*. 100a–e. On the opposing assumption that reality is fundamentally fluid and disordered cf. *Tht*. 160d, where Socrates places Homer at the head of a "tribe" (*phulon*) that asserts all things are in motion, an opinion, he later remarks, that "the ancients concealed from the many with poetry" (180c–d). Socrates' denial at *Rep*. 377d–83c that the gods cause human suffering, take on different shapes (*ideai*), and tell lies effectively replaces the deities of the poets with Platonic forms.

[6]473c–74a. On the literal and figurative centrality of this claim in the *Republic*, see my article "The *Republic*'s Third Wave and the Paradox of Political Philosophy," *Review of Metaphysics* 51.3 (1998), 633–57.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670508000752 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ignorance (23a–b), a claim that nevertheless suggests his partial transcendence of this condition through knowledge.[7]

The *Apology*, however, is also tragic in the more specific sense that it incorporates in its presentation of the fundamental tension between the philosopher and the city the elements of tragic drama identified by Aristotle in his *Poetics* – *hamartia* or tragic error, dramatic reversal "of the action [*tōn prattomenōn*] into the opposite" (*peripeteia*), and the recognition or deepened understanding (*anagnōrisis*) that reversal occasions (1452a11–b13, 1453a7–17). Here again, it will be helpful to consider an example. Euripides' *Bacchae*, which reflects some of the earliest themes of the genre,[8] offers a vivid illustration of how the aforementioned elements of tragedy operate as dramatic mechanisms; it also embodies the specific pattern of tragic reversal that is reflected in the dramatic development of the *Apology*. In the *Bacchae*, the god Dionysus returns incognito to Thebes, the city of his birth. He plans to punish the family of Cadmus, and particularly his cousin Pentheus, for their refusal to recognize his divinity and for slandering him and his mortal mother. Pentheus, the young king of Thebes, regards himself as a stout defender of tradition and civic order, a man of action, a wise, sober, sane, and reverent individual.[9] In his eyes, the disguised Dionysus – who has drawn the

[7]Of course, both this gap and the philosopher who attempts to bridge it could also be the subject of comedy. But although the *Apology* contains seemingly comic elements, e.g., Socrates' admittedly "ridiculous" comparison of himself to a gadfly at 30e–31a, Socrates directly challenges the Athenians' conception of the difference between what is laughable and what is serious, including death. Thus the contrast between the gadfly and the "noble" horse (30e) is, as Arlene Saxonhouse notes (*Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 122), part and parcel of Socrates' inversion of conventional hierarchies (concerning which, see n. 43, below). Socrates furthermore rejects Aristophanes' laughable portrayal of him in the *Clouds* (19c–d). The choice between comedy and tragedy depends on one's perspective (is one looking from above, so to speak, or from below?) as well as one's estimation of the worth of human life; cf. Socrates' contrast between the seemingly laughable philosopher and the stunted souls of non-philosophers at *Theaetetus* 172c–176a. My argument that Socrates largely transcends tragedy in the *Apology* may support the suggestion that Socratic philosophizing as a way of life finds its closest dramatic correlate in the satyr-play. For further reflection on this topic, see my discussions of the *Cratylus* and the *Symposium* as satyr-plays in *The Paradox of Political Philosophy: Socrates' Philosophic Trial* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 131–63 (esp. 161–62) and "Plato's Dionysian Music? A Reading of the *Symposium*," *Epoché* 12.1 (2007), 17–47.

[8]Richard Seaford, "Dionysiac Drama and the Dionysiac Mysteries," *Classical Quarterly* 31.2 (1981): 252–75. These themes include the captivity and subsequent liberation of the followers of Dionysus and initiation into the Dionysiac mysteries.

[9]Cadmus's brief eulogy emphasizes that Pentheus is aggressive in defense against any injustice to the bearers of ancestral authority and to the established traditions he embraces as his own: "No one who had seen your face dared outrage the old

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Theban women out of their homes and into the wild to practice his rites – is everything he is not: a foreigner and an innovator, effeminate, a slick talker, polluted, mad, sick, and blasphemous.[10] Dionysus, however, warns Pentheus that "you do not know what your life is, nor what you are doing, nor who you are" (506), and the king is ultimately revealed to be precisely what he despises. While Pentheus seeks to capture and punish Dionysus, he switches roles with the disguised god over the course of the play; the hunter becomes the hunted, the defender of civilization a wild beast, the justified punisher justly punished.[11] Pentheus pays with his life for his ignorant refusal to honor the rites of Dionysus: in a grotesque replication of Dionysian sacrificial ritual,[12] he is torn limb from limb by the Maenadic followers of the god and paraded into town.

At a minimum, the tragedy of Pentheus teaches spectators that their traditional or habitual assumptions about themselves and the world may be woefully incapable of guiding them through the complexities and uncertainties of human experience.[13] An analogous, albeit potentially more fruitful pattern of error, reversal, and recognition obtains in many of Plato's dialogues: Socrates frequently encounters self-confident antagonists and proceeds to show – if not them, then at least Plato's readers – that their opinions are incoherent, and, more generally, that they are thoughtless about how they live and ignorant of what they suppose they know.[14] But the *Apology* resembles the *Bacchae* in other respects as

man, or if he did, you punished him. . . . No more, child, will you hug me and call me 'Grandfather' and say, 'Who is wronging or dishonoring you? Does anyone trouble you or vex your heart, old man? Tell me, grandfather, and I will punish him'" (1310–12, 1318–23). William Arrowsmith, trans., *The Bacchae*, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, vol. 4, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959).

[10]See esp. 215–47, 451–514.

[11]On Pentheus as prey, see 847–48, 1146–47, 1203–07. At 539–44, the chorus connects Pentheus's savagery with the legend that the Thebans sprang from the teeth of a dragon slain by Cadmus. The justice of Pentheus's punishment, asserted by the chorus at 991–96 and 1013–16, is acknowledged by Cadmus at 1249–50.

[12]Seaford, "Dionysiac Drama," 263.

[13]Cf. Froma I. Zeitlin, "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama," in *Nothing to Do with Dionysus?*, 78: Greek tragedy is "the epistemological genre par excellence, which continually calls into question what we know and how we think we know it." Yet it is not clear that the resulting knowledge of ignorance has any positive consequences. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty suggests that "one of the dark lessons of tragedy is that there are no lessons to be learnt, in order to avoid tragedy" ("The Psychology of Aristotelian Tragedy," in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Rorty [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992], 18).

[14]Note that a peculiar ambiguity results from the gulf between the philosopher and the city: to many of Socrates' interlocutors, being refuted may seem like a turn for the

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well. Like the *Bacchae*, it dramatizes a confrontation in which the city (or more precisely, its representative) seeks to punish an individual whose lack of reverence for the civic tradition threatens the community with corruption, the effects of which are visible in the equally shameless behavior of his followers.[15] The *Apology* also echoes the reversal in roles and expectations enacted by the characters in the *Bacchae*. Like the *Bacchae*, the *Apology* presents a conflict in which an apparent strength of the city – its power to enforce unanimity through shame and the threat of force – is revealed to be its weakness, and in which the city is effectively brought to justice by the very person it mistakenly identifies as a wrongdoer and seeks to punish.[16] Unlike Dionysus (but like Pentheus), Socrates ultimately falls victim to sacrificial violence. But it is precisely the startling way he responds to the threat of this violence – not by supplicating and flattering the Athenians, as one would expect from a defendant, but by accusing and even offending them[17] – that he is able to expose the nature of the city's *hamartia* as well as to cast his moral invulnerability in a heroic light.

worse (especially if the refutation occurs in public), but it is from a Socratic perspective a great benefit (cf. *Ap.* 36c). The same ambiguity attaches to the death of Socrates. If he is indeed a great gift to the city, his death will in itself constitute a change from better fortune to worse. But if his death provides the Athenians with an opportunity to achieve greater self-knowledge (a possibility I consider below), it may also be of lasting benefit to them.

[15]And like Dionysus, Socrates has aroused ire (he claims) because of his service to a god. One could push this comparison further by connecting his trial, as Mark Munn does in *The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), with his behavior as "a *mystagogos*, a Guide of Initiates" who has introduced into the city quasi-religious mysteries (284–291). These are the mysteries of philosophy, whose initiation-rites Aristophanes mocks in the *Clouds* (140–43, 250 ff.). Cf. *Symp*. 209e–12a.

[16]In the case of the *Bacchae*, one might say that the reverent shame (*aidōs*: 828) that binds Pentheus to the civic tradition and that makes him an enemy of the god is, in the end, that of which he dies. Dionysus cruelly drives this point home by convincing the hyper-masculine Pentheus, attached as he is to manly conceptions of shame, honor, and courage, to dress in the garb of his female worshippers just prior to his death. In defeating Pentheus, Dionysus both literally and figuratively explodes the city as a masculine endeavor. This point is thoroughly developed in Zeitlin, "Playing the Other."

[17]On Socrates' deliberate provocation of the jury see Eva Brann, "The Offense of Socrates: A Re-reading of Plato's *Apology*," *Interpretation* 7.2 (1978), 1–21. Munn states that at his trial Socrates expresses "open contempt for the Athenian public in general" and thus "reinforce[s] a reputation for contempt of the assembled public that had a long history" (*The School of History*, 286).

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A New Achilles

Like any good tragedy, the *Apology* has a plot that, at least superficially, has the potential to arouse pity and fear (cf. Aristotle *Poetics* 1449b24–28). Just as the spectators at the Great Dionysia were treated in advance to brief summaries of the plays to be performed, Plato's readers know from the first that Socrates will be convicted and sentenced to death.[18] But the *Apology* is a text intended for an "audience" not of assembled spectators but of individual readers. Nor is this a "live" audience any more than the *Apology* is a "live" performance, although it presents itself as the record of such a performance. The reader is thus in the curious position of observing in the theater of the imagination men who regard themselves as an audience – that is, the jury – watch what they hope will be a tragic spectacle (34b–35b), and of doing so in a setting more conducive to quiet and independent reflection than is provided by the emotional tumult characteristic of any meeting of the multitude, be it the theater or, as at the trial of Socrates, the law court (20e, 27b, 30c; cf. *Republic* 492b–c). It soon becomes clear, however, that the jurors are more than passive spectators. For there comes a point in the dialogue at which anyone familiar with the Greek poetic tradition can be expected to recognize that Socrates is presenting himself as a protagonist in a drama in which the Athenian jurors play a central role.

I locate this point at 28b–d, where Socrates compares himself to Achilles. To appreciate the force of this comparison, we must consider the context in which it is offered. Socrates begins his defense speech by twice reminding the jurors of Aristophanes' comic portrait of him in the *Clouds*, the play that had for many years framed his fellow citizens' perceptions of him (18b, 19c). In the sequel, he insists that Aristophanes misrepresents him (19c–d). When cross-examining Meletus, he furthermore tries to show that while his accuser attempts to make him an object of laughter (26e), it is in fact Meletus who is "jesting" or "playing" (24c, 27a, 27d). Socrates could hardly be clearer: his speeches and deeds do not fit the mold of comic drama.

Socrates' remarks about Achilles, which immediately follow his interrogation of Meletus, suggest an alternative way of understanding him. At 28b, he imagines someone speaking as follows: "Are you not ashamed, Socrates, of having followed the sort of pursuit from which you now run the risk of dying?"[19] Socrates answers that it is ignoble to fear death, or to consider anything whatsoever besides whether one's actions "are just or unjust, and the

[18]See Arthur Wallace Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens* (Oxford: The Claerndon Press, 1968), 68, on the institution of the *proagon*.

[19]Translations from the *Apology* are drawn from Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, trans., *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito and Aristophanes' Clouds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), with occasional emendations.

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deeds of a good man or a bad one" (28b). He illustrates this assertion by reminding the jurors of the behavior of Achilles, who chooses to kill Hector even though he knows his own death will soon follow.[20] But he departs from the text of Homer's *Iliad* (18.95–104) in a way that is too pointed to be anything but deliberate. As he tells the story, Hector has murdered Patroclus, and Achilles is a champion of justice. "Straightaway may I die," Socrates' Achilles says, "after I impose justice [*dikēn*] on the one doing injustice [*adikounti*], so that I do not stay here ridiculous beside the curved ships, a burden on the land" (28d). In the original Homeric passage, Achilles says nothing about justice, nor does he worry about being "laughable" or "ridiculous" (*katagelastos*). And whereas Homer's Achilles must kill Hector so as not to remain a useless burden on the land, Socrates' Achilles fears being a ridiculous burden *after* he kills Hector. Socrates implies that it is the act of dying, not that of killing, that saves Achilles from this fate. But Socrates will not die "straightaway," and so will not fulfill his heroic potential, unless the jury decides to kill him.[21]

Socrates' comparison of himself to this newly conceived Achilles suggests not only that he is engaged in a heroic act of punitive justice, but that his own death at the hands of the city is integral to his heroism and perhaps also to the punishment he metes out. By choosing the manner of his death, Socrates, like Homer's Achilles, shapes the way the story of his life will be understood and remembered. Dying in the quest for justice, he implies, confers heroic seriousness on what would otherwise be a laughable performance: he later refuses to drag his family into court and to beg for mercy, explaining that he will not participate in a "drama" that "makes the city ridiculous" (35b).

Because Socrates will not even attempt to arouse the feeling of pity that Aristotle regards as central to the cathartic experience of tragedy, it is clear that he does not regard his own situation as tragic. If Socrates rejects the script the jurors expect him to follow, however, it is not because he is insensitive to the dramatic potential of his trial. On the contrary, he tells the "men of Athens" that he has chosen to make a defense speech "on your behalf, so that you do not err thoroughly [*examartēte*, formed from the verb *hamartanein* – "to commit *hamartia*" – and the intensifier *ek*] concerning the gift of the god to

[20]Saxonhouse notes that Socrates and Achilles are both "shameless" in scorning death, in that they act without concern for "the judgments of those who gaze upon them either in admiration or contempt"; it is this independence that most "unites Socrates and Achilles" (*Free Speech and Democracy*, 120). In disdaining death, Saxonhouse adds, Socrates and Achilles also "scorn the passion on which the city builds its penal code" and thus "stand outside the city" (119). I return to the theme of shame in the next section.

[21]Note that the measure of what is ridiculous to Socrates' Achilles, and hence to Socrates, is not conventional opinion – which holds that there is shame in allowing oneself to be killed – but the opposite, a noble disdain for the danger of death. Cf. n. 7, above.

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you by voting to condemn me" (30d). Socrates thus indicates that *it is the city, his co-protagonist in the drama of the* Apology, *that runs the risk of tragic error.*[22] And with this crucial point in mind, it becomes clear that Socrates fully exploits the close affinities between the tragic theater and the Athenian courtroom.

These affinities have been well observed by Jean-Pierre Vernant.[23] Vernant's reflections on the philosophical and political significance of Greek tragedy begin from the observation that tragedy emerges at a particular historical moment in Athens, the moment when "a gap develops at the heart of the social experience." This gap "is wide enough for the oppositions between legal and political thought on the one hand and the mythical and heroic traditions on the other to stand out quite clearly," yet "narrow enough for the conflict in values still to be a painful one and for the clash to continue to take place." The "true material" of tragedy is thus "the social thought peculiar to the city-state, in particular the legal thought that was then in the process of being evolved."[24] In substance as well as structure, tragic drama and the drama of the courtroom are siblings. The social institution of competition in tragedy was set up alongside analogous political and legal institutions, "in the same urban space and with the same institutional norms as the popular assemblies or courts, a spectacle open to all the citizens, directed, acted, and judged by the qualified representatives of the various tribes. In this way it [the city] turned itself into a theater."[25] What is more, the audience of a tragic drama resembles a jury in that it constitutes "a kind of popular assembly or tribunal" for judging the tragic protagonist, a "hero [who] has ceased to be a model," and who has instead "become, both for himself and for others, a problem."[26]

Confronted by the egalitarian norms and institutions of the ancient Greek *polis*, the hero presents a problem that could be played out in court as well as in the theatre, and that is indeed played out in the *Apology*. At Socrates' trial,

[22]This assignment of roles is not unprecedented. Cf. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 35, where Vernant argues that the city is the protagonist of Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes*.

[23]Vernant has illuminated the philosophical and political significance of Greek tragedy in a series of influential essays informed both by historical inquiry and by the structuralist methodology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. These essays are collected in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy* .

[24]Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy*, 25, 27. Cf. Vernant's observation that "the tragic writers' use of a technical legal vocabulary underlies the affinities between the most favored tragic themes and certain cases that fell within the competence of the courts" (25).

[25]Ibid., 33.

[26]Ibid., 88, 25. Cf. the Athenian Stranger's condemnation of what might be called "theatocracy" in the courts (*Laws* 876b).

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Meletus speaks as a radical democrat: according to him, all other Athenians make the young "noble and good" while Socrates alone corrupts them (25a).[27] But the protagonists of tragic drama are capable of judging as well as being judged. In the face of his accuser's democratic pieties, Socrates presents himself as one who performs "the greatest benefaction" for his fellow Athenians (36c), and he asserts divine authority in doing so. He maintains that "the god" has "stationed" him at his post, appointing him to combat the ignorance and injustice of his fellow Athenians. He heroically accepts the risks of this divine mission, even though, like Achilles, he expects to die for his efforts – flicked from the body politic like a gadfly from a drowsy horse. But, he says, he has always fought for justice, knowing full well the danger of doing so. Come what may, he will not now beg to be acquitted (28e–35d).

Socrates at War

While tragedy is rooted in social reality, Vernant observes, it calls that reality into question.[28] Among other things, tragedy explores the nature of *kratos* or power, as in *dēmokratia*: does democratic authority rest on *peithō* or *bia*, "gentle persuasion" and mutual agreement or brute force that is opposed to justice and right?[29] This is a fundamental issue in the *Apology*, in which Socrates speaks as a champion of rational persuasion. More than a dozen times in this dialogue, he uses some form of the verb *peithein*, "to persuade," to characterize his own activity.[30] He emphasizes that his life is devoted to rational

[27]On Meletus as a radical democrat, see Howland, *The Paradox of Political Philosophy*, 103. The hostility of the restored democracy toward Socrates was in part attributable to his association with men of tyrannical inclination such as Alcibiades and Critias, the cousin of Plato's mother and leader of the oligarchic regime of the Thirty Tyrants that was installed by the victorious Spartans in 404. See Xenophon *Memorabilia* 1.2.12 with the sources cited at Munn, *The School of History*, 425 n. 33. Both Plato and Socrates were members of the Three Thousand, citizens who had been selected by the Thirty to share in the government and who had remained in the city of Athens during the oligarchy; see Peter Krentz, *The Thirty at Athens* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 64–65. Munn notes that, by 400/399, Socrates' name "had been invoked often enough in connection with the enemies of democracy to create an ill-defined yet pervasive aura of sinister power about the man" (*The School of History*, 289).

[28]Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy*, 33.

[29]Vernant's example of a drama where this issue is central is Aeschylus's *Suppliants* (*Myth and Tragedy*, 39), but the nature and source of political authority is obviously a major theme in tragedy. Outstanding examples include Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Antigone* and Euripides' *Hecuba*.

[30]Fifteen, if my count is correct: 29d3, 30a8, 30e7, 31a3, 31b5, 35c2, 35d3, 36c5, 37a5, 37a6, 37e5, 38a1, 38a6, 38a7, 38d4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670508000752 Published online by Cambridge University Press

persuasion and nonpartisan resistance to the unjust exercise of civic power, as instanced by his opposition to the trial of the ten generals under the democracy and his refusal to participate in the arrest of Leon of Salamis under the oligarchy of the Thirty Tyrants (30a, 32a–d). The Athenians, Socrates predicts, will use force to silence him (31a; cf. 18e–19a). Socrates thus gears his self-presentation in the *Apology* toward insuring that his death will be understood as having unmasked one particularly ugly root of Athenian civic unanimity.

Socrates' intention begins to come to light when he asks whether his behavior is shameful because it exposes him to the risk of death (28b). This question recalls Callicles' assertion in the *Gorgias* that one who pursues philosophy becomes "unmanly [*anandrōi*] in fleeing the middle ground of the city and the places of assembly, in which, as the poet said, 'men [*andras*] win distinction'" (485d).[31] Callicles goes on to ask, rhetorically, whether Socrates' situation isn't "shameful," given that he would be unable to defend himself if he were ever hauled off to court (486a–c).[32] The speaker Socrates imagines at *Apology* 28b voices precisely the same criticism: real men – politicized human beings, or *andres* – would be ashamed if they were shown to be incapable of defending themselves against their enemies.

By underscoring the fact that the virtue of *andreia* ("manliness" or courage) is based in shame, these passages from the *Apology* and the *Gorgias* expose a feature of civic education in the *polis* that strains against the independent reflection encouraged by tragedy and the thoughtfulness and individual initiative visible elsewhere in Athenian culture.[33] In considering this dimension of civic education, we do well to recall Friedrich Nietzsche's reflections on the harshness of life in the ancient world.

> Manifold experience teaches [the citizens of the *polis*] to which qualities above all they owe the fact that, despite all gods and men, they are still there, that they have always triumphed: these qualities they call virtues, these virtues alone they cultivate. They do this with hardness, indeed they want hardness; every aristocratic morality is intolerant – in the education of youth, in the arrangements for women, in their marriage customs, in the relations of old and young, in their penal laws . . . they consider intolerance itself a virtue, calling it "justice."[34]

[31]The quotation is from *Iliad* 9.441.

[32]The word Callicles uses is *aischron*, which echoes the verb *aischunomai*, "to be ashamed," that Socrates uses at *Ap*. 28b.

[33]Cf. the speech of the Corinthians in Thucydides, 1.70–71. This paragraph adumbrates points that are developed at length in chap. 4 ("Paideia and the Preparation for Battle") of Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 105–35.

[34]*Beyond Good and Evil*, 9.262. I have slightly modified the translation of Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966).

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As Nietzsche observes, the distinctive customs and practices of any ancient city derive ever-increasing authority from the simple fact that the city endures. The city's peculiar ways, hallowed by time, become the *patrioi nomoi* – the "ancestral ways."[35] *Paideia* is the process of culture-formation, whereby the ancestral ways – including traditional judgments about what is noble or base, praiseworthy or shameful, just or unjust – are established in the souls of the young (*hoi paides*) as the authoritative framework of thinking and feeling. The primary mechanism that makes this process work is not reason, but the forceful inducements of public shame and punishment on one hand and honor on the other. These inducements are not meant to promote independent reflection, but to arouse spiritedness in the defense of one's own, and to produce among the citizens concord or "like-mindedness" (*homonoia*) about the most important things. For a city without concord is doubly vulnerable: it will be unable to ward off external threats as a coherent unit and is likely to fall prey to civil strife.

At 28b, Socrates rejects not only the imagined speaker's opinion of what is shameful, but also a primary source of the city's power over its citizens – its attempt to control their behavior by means of shame and the threat of force (as well as by honor, the positive correlate of public embarrassment and ridicule). Socrates of course does not maintain that feelings of shame are always inappropriate. On the contrary, he frequently uses shame – not, however, as an instrument to inculcate conventional opinion, but as a pedagogical tool in exhorting and chastising his fellow citizens (cf. 29d–e). He accordingly insists that one ought not to fear public condemnation or punishment as such, for these things are not in themselves shameful. One should be ashamed only of behaving ignorantly and unjustly, and unexamined conventional opinion is not the measure of truth and justice: Socrates finds that those more highly reputed for wisdom are as a rule most deficient in it, and vice versa (22a).[36]

[35]Nietzsche's reflections on the "original tribal community" in the *Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay, section 19, may be germane in this context: "The conviction reigns that it is only through the sacrifices and accomplishments of the ancestors that the tribe *exists* – and one has to *pay them back* with sacrifices and accomplishments: one thus recognizes a *debt* that constantly grows greater since these forbears never cease, in their continued existence as powerful spirits, to accord the tribe new advantages and new strengths." (Translation of Walter Kaufmann, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* [New York: Random House, 1967], emphases in original.)

[36]Christina Tarnopolsky distinguishes between the "flattering shame" employed by Callicles (and the imagined speaker at 28b), which caters to the existing prejudices of one's audience, and the "respectful shame" of Socrates and Plato, which "creates a potentially salutary discomfort and perplexity … that is necessary for self-consciousness, self-reflection, self-criticism, and moral and political deliberation." "Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants: Plato and the Contemporary Politics of Shame," *Political Theory* 32.4 (2004): 479.

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Immediately following his remarks about Achilles, Socrates asserts that one must remain wherever one has stationed himself, holding that it is best, and wherever he has been stationed by a ruler. Socrates remained at his station in Potidaeia, Delium, and Amphipolis when he was ordered to do so by the Athenian commanders; had he nonetheless abandoned the post at which he was stationed by the god, he would have done something terrible (28d–29a). "The god" to whom Socrates refers is presumably the one who communicated through the oracle at Delphi, and who allegedly authorizes his practice of interrogating his fellow citizens. But the very structure of this passage, in which Socrates speaks of the god just when one would expect him to speak of himself, raises a question about who or what has stationed him at his post.[37] Beyond this, it is striking that Socrates compares remaining at his post with doing his military duty in three Athenian battles. Does he mean to imply that his practice of examining the Athenians is akin to military conflict? If so, is he, the philosophical champion of justice – who early on asked the jurors to indulge his peculiar manner of speech as they would the dialect of a foreigner (17d) – at war with the city of Athens?

We may grant that waging war and punishing injustice are not entirely dissimilar activities. But there is something unconvincing about Socrates' suggestion that his refusal to stop philosophizing, even at the risk of dying, amounts simply to doing what he has done all along in the course of serving the god. Socrates insists that both his first accusers and his latest accusers have slandered him; this slander, which he attributes both to "the many" (28a) and to Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon (23d–24a), is presumably part and parcel of the injustice he wishes to punish.[38] But because the slander of his accusers was initially prompted by his philosophical activity, manning his ostensibly philosophical post cannot at first have involved punishing these wrongdoers. Socrates evidently shifts gears when he is hauled before the jury. Just as Achilles stopped withholding himself from battle when he decided to avenge the death of Patroclus, Socrates, who somewhat disingenuously claims to have previously remained aloof from public life (36b) – he did, after all, serve on the Council or Boulē (32a–b) – decisively enters the dangerous arena of public, political activity when he appears in court.

In sum, the analogy of fighting in a war applies specifically to Socrates' conduct in the courtroom (cf. 38e–39a).[39] Socrates claims that the god

[37]Cf. Howland, *The Paradox of Political Philosophy*, 29.

[38]Cf. 30d, where Socrates states that Meletus is "attempting to kill a man unjustly." At 39b, he says that his accusers have been "convicted by the truth of wretchedness and injustice."

[39]Cf. Brann, "The Offense of Socrates," 18–19: "Once a defendant, Socrates became a *resister*, the defender of philosophy from the city's attack. He must have thought that this public occasion was a moment to display spirit, to confirm the lifelong business of words in deed, to be what Achilles, to whom he compares himself, was in war, a hero for philosophy (28c)."

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ordered him to philosophize by examining others, but it is he who decides to risk death by speaking as he does at his trial. If things divine play any role in this decision, they do so only by offering no opposition to his behavior.[40] One also suspects that Socrates reinterprets his past philosophical activity in the light of this decision, stressing wherever possible the radical opposition between him and the city. Socrates' revision of Homer hints at this possibility. While Homer's Achilles is moved by private grief, Socrates' Achilles is the servant of public justice. Perhaps the story Socrates tells about his philosophical activity involves a similar kind of rewriting, turning what was largely, if not essentially, a private affair – philosophical inquiry through dialogue – into the public punishment of injustice. This speculation is partially supported by Socrates' later remark that prior to his appearance in court he has led a private life, never "in public ... dar[ing] to go up ... to counsel the city" (31c).[41]

It is also important to note that Socrates' behavior is something more than courageous, for he seems to invite the jurors either to acquit him or to impose capital punishment: he twice reminds them of Anytus's recommendation that he either not be tried at all, or, if tried, that he be sentenced to death (29b–c, 30b). In the event that he is not left free to philosophize, Socrates seems to welcome his own execution. Why would he do so?

Part of the answer is that Socrates regards as foolishness what many of his fellow citizens deem wisdom. The very fact that he is likely to incur the jurors' hatred by speaking frankly, he asserts, is "a proof that I speak the truth" (24a). By this admittedly faulty logic, the most extreme manifestation of the Athenians' hatred would furnish the most convincing demonstration of the correctness of Socrates' indictment of them.[42] More to the point, Socrates condemns the city's use of shame and the threat of force to silence reasonable dissent, stifle independent reflection, and effectively inculcate the habits of the unexamined life in the souls of its citizens. From a Socratic perspective, the city ignorantly – but nonetheless unjustly – attempts to confine its citizens to a life not worth living for a human being (cf. 38a). This, its *hamartia* in the deepest sense, is the root of the hostility to Socrates that comes to fruition at his trial. But Socrates' defense of reason in the face of force would

[40]At 31c–d, Socrates notes that he was previously prevented from entering public life by his *daimonion*; having just been condemned to death, he observes that his *daimonion* did not oppose him at any point prior to or during his defense speech (40a–b).

[41]Socrates glosses over another important difference between himself and Achilles: whereas Achilles is a young man when he chooses to follow a path that will lead to his death, Socrates conveniently waits until the age of seventy to risk his life in confronting the city. He thereby implies that a life of "private" philosophizing is more choiceworthy than the public correction of injustice in which he is engaged in the *Apology*.

[42]Cf. Slings, *Plato's Apology of Socrates*, 46: Socrates presents "the image of a man who, just because he is of exceptional stature, is not understood and has become the victim of the petty resentment of the crowd."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670508000752 Published online by Cambridge University Press

indeed be laughable unless he could show that even the prospect of capital punishment would not compel him to abandon his best judgment. For this reason, Socrates must be executed. Only by dying with equanimity can he back up his claim to care for justice and virtue above all, and to place the good of his soul above that of his body (cf. 29d–30b). Having done so, he will have demonstrated that there is a kind of human being who is, both in speech and deed, beyond the control of the city. And if those who voted to condemn Socrates or who supported his condemnation achieve some understanding of their error by reflecting on the significance of this demonstration, they will have suffered punishment not in the conventional sense of being harmed, but in the Socratic sense of being improved in soul (cf. *Gorgias* 476a–480d).[43]

The *Apology*'s Tragic Ambiguity

In Athenian tragic drama, contact with the divine sphere tends to disturb human life. As Vernant notes, "the human condition is reversed . . . as soon as it is scrutinized in relation to the gods"; tragedy teaches, in opposition to the Protagorean dictum, that "it is god who is the measure of man."[44] In the Platonic dialogues, it is philosophy that is the measure of man, but the *Apology* refers philosophy to the gods: if Socrates measures the lives of his fellow citizens in relation to his own, it is (so he claims) only because the god has authorized him to do so.[45] And it is his insistence

[43]My reading of the *Apology* harmonizes in significant respects with that of Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy*, which focuses on the way Socrates effectively redefines shame, "destroying it as an emotion that entailed revering one's fellow citizens, following their traditions, and accepting their hierarchies." In freeing shame from the "judgmental gaze and reverence [*aidōs*] that Protagoras had so praised as the grounding of political life [in the *Protagoras*, 322c]," Socrates "completely invert[s] the language of the Athenian democracy" (e.g., "'daring' is not to speak frankly; it is to pander to the jurors [cf. 38d–e]") and effectively turns "the world . . . [of the Athenians] upside down: accuser is accused, the proud is the one who should feel shame, the free are enslaved, and from all these inversions, Socrates, the one who had been on trial, emerges as the unlikely hero of the story, the one who will 'save' Athens by his 'shameless' speech" (113, 115, 121). The *Apology* thus points to "the tension between the willingness to openly speak 'the truth' . . . and the respect for what is old and traditionally binds cities together in a Protagorean fashion" (111).

[44]Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy*, 120, 431 n. 37.

[45]The issues here are complex. I do not think that, in referring to Delphi, Socrates is merely playing with the religious sensibilities of the jury. On one hand, the oracle at Delphi arouses, focuses, and validates Socrates' desire for wisdom by setting him on the path to find the answers to two questions that it intertwines: "Who is Socrates?" and "What is wisdom?" On the other, the oracle has this effect only because

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that he serves the god that lends tragic power and ambiguity to Socrates' self-presentation in the *Apology*.

One ambiguity of the *Apology* concerns the difficulty of determining precisely where justice lies in Socrates' conflict with the city. His courtroom performance is on one hand a victory for philosophy, in that it establishes the power of reason in the face of force. Socrates defeats the city in two ways. The first consists in his exposure of the ugly or ignoble use of shame and intimidation to secure civic unanimity, a tactic that, as we shall see, is occasionally echoed – as in the case of Socrates' own trial – by the use of scapegoating violence masquerading as religious purification. The second consists in his demonstration of the impotence of intimidation and violence in the face of a philosophically courageous individual. But because Socrates is an Athenian as well as a philosopher, his victory is in some respects self-defeating. He arguably undermines the concord that is essential for the city's survival just to the extent that he persuades others to follow his example – a point suggested by his prediction that his execution will provoke the vengeance of a multitude of younger, harsher, and more indignant human beings (39c–d).[46] Considered in this way, philosophical justice looks like political injustice.

We shall return to the problem of justice in due course. For now, we may note that the tragic ambiguity of the *Apology* comes to light also insofar as Socrates blurs the distinction between himself and the god in explaining his philosophical activity. This uncertainty about agency is perhaps the most distinctive feature of Greek tragedy – a genre in which the protagonist moves in the grey zone between pure passivity or suffering and pure activity or responsibility.[47] In the case of the *Apology*, it is striking that the same sort of ambiguity applies to the city as well. For the city's punishment of Socrates' injustice simultaneously crowns or completes Socrates' punishment of the city's injustice.

A further source of ambiguity in the *Apology*, and one that connects Socrates with the protagonist of the most well-known of all the Greek tragedies, is Socrates' status as both a heroic benefactor of the city and a scapegoat for

Socrates presupposes that the god speaks the truth (21b). Perhaps, as an anonymous referee has suggested, it is a specifically philosophical understanding of god that measures man in the Platonic dialogues. For further discussion, see my *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 66–67.

[46]With respect to this prediction, there is a tragically satisfying yet dubious tradition that Socrates' accusers suffered reprisal shortly after his trial. See the sources cited at Debra Nails, *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 38, *s.v.* "Anytus."

[47]Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part I*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 143–144.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670508000752 Published online by Cambridge University Press

its ills. To understand this dimension of the dialogue, we must turn to Sophocles' *Oedipus*.

Socrates, Oedipus, and the *Pharmakos*

The complexities of Sophocles' *Oedipus* form the theme of one of Vernant's most influential essays, "Ambiguity and Reversal: On the Enigmatic Structure of *Oedipus Rex*."[48] "The Corinthian stranger," Vernant writes, "is in reality a native of Thebes; the solver of riddles is a riddle he himself cannot solve; the dispenser of justice is a criminal; the clairvoyant, a blind man; the savior of the town, its doom."[49] The savior of Thebes from the depredations of the Sphinx, Oedipus has, in the words of the priest who speaks for the suppliants in the first scene of the play, demonstrated the godlike ability to "set straight" life itself (39). Driven by a "passionate desire to learn the truth at all costs,"[50] he proceeds to solve the riddle posed by the Delphic oracle about the identity of the murderer of Laius (109–10). When he discovers that he is the pollution at the root of the current plague, he saves the city once again, purifying it through his willing expulsion.

The ambiguities that characterize Oedipus appear also in the figure of Socrates in the *Apology*. Socrates is an Athenian who speaks in the manner of a foreigner (17d). Like Oedipus, he is both a riddle solver and a riddle. Oedipus becomes who he is – the savior and king of Thebes – by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, whose solution is man himself. But he *learns* who he is by solving another divine riddle, this time from Delphi. Socrates, too, confronts himself as a riddle in the form of an oracle from Delphi. In solving their respective Delphic riddles, Oedipus and Socrates illuminate nothing less than the human condition: the chorus calls Oedipus a *paradeigma* or exemplar of man's ability to win only the mere appearance of happiness (1193), while Socrates calls himself a *paradeigma* of the knowledge of ignorance that is human wisdom (23b). Like Oedipus, Socrates is subject to justice in the precise measure that he dispenses it, for it is his chastisement of the Athenians in the name of truth and justice that gets him hauled into court and for which he pays with his life. But perhaps Socrates' most telling ambiguity, and the one that most interests Vernant in the case of Oedipus, is his paradoxical status as both the savior and the ruin of his community.

Following Louis Gernet, Vernant links Oedipus's insistence on being evicted from Thebes at the end of the play with the annual Athenian ritual of the *pharmakos*, which "aimed at the periodical expulsion of all the defilement accumulated over the past year."[51] During the festival of the

[48]Reprinted in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy*, 113–40.
[49]Ibid., 119.
[50]Ibid., 116.
[51]Ibid., 128 with 433 n. 87.

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Thargelia, two *pharmakoi*, "inferior, degraded beings" having been selected from "the dregs of the population," were paraded through the town, ritually beaten, and expelled from the city. So, too, Oedipus is revealed to be an *agos* or pollution (cf. 1426) who "carr[ies] the whole weight of all the misfortune that afflicts his fellow citizens" and must thus be expelled.[52] The figure of Oedipus thus reflects his dual status as *tyrannos* and *pharmakos*, king and scapegoat. This "polarity," Vernant notes, was part of the religious practice and social thought of the Greeks, which Sophocles used "to symbolize man and his fundamental ambiguity." The figures of king and scapegoat are in fact symmetrical, since both are "*individuals* responsible for the *collective* salvation of the group." Greek legend connected the prosperity or misfortune of the people with the justice or criminality of the king; in the event that "a divine scourge afflicts a people, the normal solution is to sacrifice the king."[53] We may add that the notion of the *pharmakos* in itself expresses the polarity of salvation and doom. The closely related term *pharmakon* can mean both "poison" and "remedy"; the expulsion of poison or pollution in the figure of the *pharmakos* is accordingly understood to be the ritual cure for a sickness that afflicts the entire community.[54]

Vernant's reflections are extended by René Girard in his essay "Oedipus and the Surrogate Victim," which constitutes part of a larger exploration of the relationship between religion and violence.[55] Girard draws a sharp distinction between the myth of Oedipus, which leaves no doubt about his tragic guilt, and Sophocles' drama, in which Tiresias's accusation of patricide and incest is merely "an act of reprisal arising from the hostile exchange of a tragic debate."[56] "Any community that has fallen prey to violence or has been stricken by some overwhelming catastrophe," Girard writes, "hurls itself blindly into the search for a scapegoat," a "surrogate victim" whom the community regards as "polluted" and blames for all its ills. The sacrifice of such a victim produces unanimity through sacred or purifying violence, which is in Girard's view "the fundamental phenomenon of primitive religion."[57] By reading the tragedy independently of the myth, Girard is able to see

[52]Ibid., 128, 131.

[53]Ibid., 131–32.

[54]Louis Moulinier, *Le pur et l'impur dans la pensée des Grecs d'Homère à Aristote* (Paris: Libraire C. Klincksieck, 1952), 98–99. For an extended reflection on the connection between these equally ambiguous terms, see Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61–171. Derrida links the *pharmakon* of writing (*Phdr.* 230d, 274e) with Plato's representation of Socrates as a *pharmakeus*, a "synonym" of "*pharmakos* (wizard, magician, poisoner)" (130).

[55]René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Coby (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

[56]Ibid., 71.

[57]Ibid., 79, 81.

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Sophocles' play as the dramatic depiction of a "sacrificial crisis" of violence that threatens to destroy Thebes.

The action of the *Oedipus* is set in motion by a Delphic pronouncement that connects the presence in Thebes of the murderer of Laius, the previous king, with the plague that has fallen upon the city. Oedipus subsequently curses this unknown murderer as a "pollution" (*miasma*, 241) that must be exiled or killed for the sake of the community. His search for this scapegoat leads to a series of mutual recriminations by the play's "three protagonists," Oedipus, Creon, and Tiresias. Noting that these men "are engulfed in the same storm of passion," Girard argues that this storm of anger indicates the real plague from which Thebes suffers, namely, an epidemic of reciprocal violence. In Girard's reading, it is only because Oedipus happens to be defeated in his tragic encounter with Creon and Tiresias that he becomes the surrogate victim or scapegoat who "restores peace and order by his departure."[58]

Particularly when considered in connection with Vernant's interpretation of Oedipus as *pharmakos*, Girard's attention to the production of civic unanimity through sacred violence sheds new light on the *Apology*. For Plato is clearly aware of the basic social dynamic Girard explores. This becomes evident in the two examples Socrates gives as proof of his practice of fearlessly opposing injustice, both of which have to do with the treatment of men who have fallen afoul of those who hold power in the city. Let us consider each example in turn.

As Xenophon tells the story in his *Hellenica*, the commanders of the sea-battle at Arginusae in 406, who were charged with neglecting their duty to rescue shipwrecked soldiers, were in effect delivered by the Council to the pleasure of the angry multitude. Xenophon notes that the Assembly met to decide the fate of the generals immediately after the citywide festival of the Apatouria. The temper of the war-weary Athenians must have been provoked at the Apatouria by the sight of a large number of mourners, who were easily identifiable by their shaved heads and garments; Xenophon adds that some men were actually bribed to pretend in the Assembly that they were kinsmen of those who had perished at Arginusae (*Hellenica* 1.7.8). Among the members of the Council, Socrates alone objected to the trial of the generals as a group; the six who were present in Athens were nevertheless tried and executed, a deed of which the citizens subsequently repented (*Hellenica* 1.7.35).

Although Socrates maintains in the *Apology* that the collective trial of the commanders at Arginusae was "unlawful" (*para tous nomous*, 32b), it has been argued that his objection had no statutory basis.[59] If this is correct, the perception that his fellow Athenians were behaving like a lynch mob

[58]Ibid., 70, 85.
[59]Munn, *The School of History*, 186.

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seeking a scapegoat for the city's ills must have been sufficient in itself to motivate Socrates' opposition.[60] In any event, Socrates' second example of his resistance to injustice extends the theme of scapegoating. On its surface, the episode of the arrest of Leon illustrates the tendency of those who wield power indiscriminately to try to implicate as many men as possible in their misdeeds. But the Thirty, as Walter Burkert observes in his discussion of the ritual of the *pharmakos*, also "designate[d] their political murders as a purification – a purge in the most ominous sense of the word."[61] The episode of Leon thus links the theme of scapegoating with that of religious purification.[62]

In fine, Socrates chooses to illustrate his past resistance to injustice in a way that establishes his opposition to the precise social dynamic with which he is threatened at his trial. His accusers assert that he is "most polluted" (*miarōtatos*: 23d), and Meletus adds that he alone corrupts the young. To his accusers, Socrates' impiety is a *miasma*, a contamination that infects the most impressionable members of the community. The expulsion or execution of Socrates, in whom all of the corruption that plagues the city is supposedly concentrated, would thus serve the dual function of purifying and uniting the Athenians.[63] No less than Oedipus, Socrates plays the role of a *pharmakos*, with all of the ambiguity this entails. Socrates' status as both the city's savior and the source of its pollution, as something both more and less than human, is suggested by his image of himself as a gadfly sent to awaken the drowsy horse of Athens (30e–31a). Although the image seems intended to clarify his role as a gift from the god (30d), the gadfly is an insect, lower even than the horse, and is also a species of pestilence. This same ambiguous duality may also be hinted at in Socrates' request to be boarded in the Prutaneion as befits Athens' great benefactors, for the *pharmakoi*, too, were apparently boarded and kept in the Prutaneion prior to their ritual expulsion. Finally, it is interesting to note that the expulsion of

[60]It does not follow that Socrates was mistaken in asserting that the trial would be *para tous nomous*. Martin Ostwald argues that *paranomia* can refer to the transgression of general social codes of behavior if not also of specific legal, political, or religious injunctions. See Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law: Law, Society, and Politics in Fifth-Century Athens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 111–29, esp. 113–16.

[61]Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 83.

[62]If Munn is correct in inferring that the Meletus who accuses Socrates is the same one summoned by the Thirty to arrest Leon (*The School of History*, 426 n. 34), Socrates' reference to this episode is also a sharp dig at his accusers.

[63]The attempt of Socrates' accusers to root out pollution (*miasma*) by going to court is dramatically anticipated by Euthyphro's prosecution of his father, of which Socrates learns on the occasion of his preliminary hearing (*Euthphr*. 4b–c).

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the *pharmakoi* took place on the sixth day of the month of *Thargeliōn*, which is supposed to have been Socrates' birthday. This was also roughly the time at which Socrates' trial occurred, for the yearly sacred voyage to Delos that delayed his execution took place during the same month.[64]

Socrates the Playwright

Although Socrates provides ample reason to regard him as a hero-as-*pharmakos* on the model of Oedipus, he differs from Oedipus in ways that allow him to transcend the Theban king's tragic fate. Perhaps the most obvious difference is that, whereas the reversal of fortune characteristic of tragedy is concentrated in the hero and reflected in his suffering, Socrates experiences no such reversal or suffering. This is because he sees himself from the first as a servant of the divine in relation to the human world. It is a scholarly commonplace that tragedy turns upon a failure to recognize the mysterious interdependence of *ēthos* and *daimōn*, "character" and "destiny."[65] The tragic protagonist initially understands himself in terms of *ēthos*. He is in an ethical sense a genuine self, transparently reflective and responsible, whose deeds manifest a settled disposition to think, speak, and act as befits a noble individual. But events disclose the shocking fact that "these feelings, pronouncements, and actions [are] also ... the expression of a religious power, a *daimōn* operating through them."[66] Socrates, however, experiences no such shock of recognition and reversal because he closes the tragic gap between *ēthos* and *daimōn* almost immediately, understanding each in terms of the other virtually from the outset of his philosophical activity. In just two Stephanus pages, he goes from attempting to refute the oracle Chaerephon received at Delphi to presenting himself as an exemplar of the divine teaching that "human wisdom is worth little or nothing" (21b, 23a–b). Unlike the tragic hero, Socrates cannot be surprised by the seemingly extraneous religious power of *daimōn*, because in responding as he

[64]On the practice of feeding and keeping the *pharmakoi* in the Prutaneion, see Aristophanes, *Knights* 1405, with the scholiast on *Knights* 1136. Socrates' birthdate is recorded at Diogenes Laertius 2.44. This evidence is cited in Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, 3rd ed., 1922 (New York: Meridian Press, 1955), 95–106. The month of the sacred voyage to Delos is noted in Holger Thesleff, *Studies in Platonic Chronology* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica 1982), 26 n. 24. On Socrates as *pharmakos*, cf. Derrida's reflections and extensive citations in "Plato's Pharmacy," 128–34.

[65]Vernant follows R. R. Winnington-Ingram in connecting this point with the syntactical ambiguity of Heraclitus's dictum that *ēthos anthrōpōi daimōn estin*, "character for a human being is destiny" (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy*, 37).

[66]Ibid., 37.

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does to the oracle, he opens himself up to this power and joins it with his conception of *ēthos*.[67]

Like Oedipus, Socrates becomes a sacrificial victim, but unlike Oedipus, he is not surprised by this outcome. Socrates is well aware of the social forces on which his fate depends. Indeed, his exposure and denunciation of the achievement of civic unanimity through sacrificial violence – the practice of which, as he shows, constitutes nothing less than a repeated pattern of injustice – is part and parcel of his condemnation of the use of force rather than rational persuasion in civic education. As an enemy of arbitrary force, Socrates steadfastly refuses to sacrifice himself for the city. Here, too, he differs from Oedipus, who ultimately embraces his fate and insists on being expelled for the good of Thebes (1436–37) – thereby affirming, from Girard's point of view, the sacred character of the social violence to which he has fallen victim. For his part, Socrates explicitly rejects his role as *pharmakos*, prophesying that immediately after his death harsh vengeance will strike those who voted to condemn him (39b–c). He thus refuses to acknowledge the political legitimacy, much less the sacred character, of the legally authorized force to which he is subjected.

Socrates' principled resistance to arbitrary force makes it all the more remarkable that he seems to engineer his death by judicial violence no less vigorously than he deplores the injustice of his accusers.[68] The more closely one examines the *Apology*, the more one becomes aware that Socrates effectively authors the story of his death. It is Socrates who, rejecting the laughable portrait Aristophanes has drawn of him in the *Clouds* (19c, cf. 18d), rewrites the character of Homer's Achilles in such a way as to provide a model for his self-presentation as a heroic agent of justice. It is Socrates who introduces the language that allows us to see him as a surrogate victim, reminding the jurors that his accusers claim he is supremely polluted and maneuvering Meletus into agreeing with his assertion that "I alone corrupt [the young]" (25a). It is Socrates who twice mentions Anytus's recommendation that he be executed. And it is Socrates who consistently provokes the jurors by contrasting the cowardice and ignobility inherent in the Athenian conception of manliness with his courage and justice, and, when the time comes to name his punishment, by insultingly proposing a signal civic honor. All of this virtually guarantees not only that he will be convicted and executed, but

[67]On Socrates' response to the oracle, see above, n. 45. Socrates' openness to *daimōn* seems also to be reflected in his references to the private communications of his *daimonion*, the inner divine voice that he appears to have seamlessly incorporated within his self-conception (31c–d, 40a–b).

[68]In this sense, Socrates is indeed "a provocative and voluntary *pharmakos* (and not solicited and consenting)," as Philipe Lacoue-Labarthe maintains in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, trans. Christopher Fynsk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 135 n. 136.

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that his death will be interpreted as a confrontation between the heroic nobility of philosophy and the viciousness of force without reason.

If Oedipus is a puppet in the tragedy that bears his name, Socrates is both puppet and puppet master in the *Apology*. Oedipus is a classic tragic protagonist in that he comes to realize, too late, that he is playing a part in a mysterious, seemingly superhuman drama of whose very existence he was unaware. Socrates, on the other hand, having been awakened by Delphi to a drama that transcends the familiar performance of social and political roles, and grasping the theatrical potential of a public trial, seizes the opportunity to author both the part that he will play and that of his antagonists. Socrates' accusers are furthermore unaware that, in successfully convincing the jury to convict and execute him, they are acting out a role he has scripted for them.

In the middle of his cross-examination of Meletus, Socrates swears "by Hera" (24e). This feminine oath hints at Socrates' resistance to the masculine conceptions of shame, honor, and courage in which the civic identity of the Athenians is rooted, and especially to the force that authorizes them. It is thus perhaps no surprise that the allegedly "unmanly" Socrates (*Gorgias* 485d) confronts his accusers in a manner that is, by the standards of Greek tragedy, typically feminine: he uses their aggressive energy against them, drawing them into traps both in speech and in deed.[69]

The first of these traps is sprung in argument. Known to the many through the comic portrait sketched by Aristophanes, and famous for his irony (cf. 38a), Socrates is hauled into court by Meletus. But by reducing Meletus to silence on the charges of impiety and corrupting the young, Socrates shows that it is his accuser who does injustice, jesting in the serious matter of legal action and ironically "pretending to be in earnest and to be concerned about things for which he never cared at all" (24c; cf. 27d). By the same token, it is the seemingly laughable Socrates who engages in the serious business of combating injustice and benefiting, not just the young, but all Athenians, tirelessly urging them to care for how their souls will be in the best possible condition (30a–b). And it is the allegedly impious Socrates whose service to the god at the risk of death shows that he believes, as he maintains, "as none of my accusers does" (35d).

The second, more devious trap employed by Socrates unfolds in deed rather than speech: Socrates grants his accusers their wish by behaving in a way that virtually guarantees he will be convicted and executed. The Athenians who condemn him do not realize that the victory of the city by means of force is also its defeat. Socrates' aim is to prove that there exists a kind of human being who cannot be compelled to act contrary to his best understanding of truth and justice, who is immune to force without reason, and who is therefore beyond the control of the city. By publicly subjecting

[69]The revenge wrought by Hecuba and her accomplices against Polymestor in Euripides' *Hecuba* provides a good example of this feminine strategy.

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Socrates to what it supposes is the shame of a criminal conviction and then to what it supposes to be the terror of death by execution, the city gives him the only means by which he could decisively demonstrate his independence. And while this dramatic demonstration leaves the bodies of the Athenians intact, it strikes a blow at the soul of the body politic – the mechanisms of shame, fear, and violence that help to produce civic unanimity in the *polis*.

Socrates' Complicity

Socrates is a *pharmakos*, but one whose death is meant to accomplish two different and contradictory purifications, depending on whether one adopts his viewpoint or that of the Athenians who condemn him. From either perspective, the sacrifice of Socrates cannot in itself purify the city of injustice and ignorance, because this sacrifice requires that he be misunderstood as the source of the city's pollution and unjustly executed. Stated more directly, the *Apology* is a dramatic demonstration of the paradox that philosophical reason cannot prove its independence from civic force without suffering under the yoke of compulsion to the point of being silenced. Socrates' attempt to defeat injustice and ignorance is unsuccessful just to the extent that he becomes complicitous in, and falls victim to, the forces against which he fights.

It must also be said that the benefit Socrates performs for the city by his moral example is inseparable from the potential harm he inflicts on it. It is extremely doubtful whether human beings can learn to feel shame and fear only in the presence of vice, whether the love of truth and justice is by itself sufficient to forge strong and effective bonds of civic unity, and whether political communities can dispense altogether with indiscriminate violence. Socrates' noble example threatens to precipitate a civic crisis, precisely to the extent that it may move his admirers to act without reflecting on the intricacies of the problem this example opens up. Philosophers, after all, require the protection of political communities – to say nothing of the moral obligation they incur as beneficiaries of this protection.[70]

I do not mean to imply that the Athenians acted justly in condemning and executing Socrates. I simply wish to observe that Socrates is arguably also guilty of injustice in the *Apology*. Socrates may exceed the bounds of justice in his insistence on virtue at the price of civic unanimity, or on the pursuit of what is best at the cost of what is necessary. And he may have blood on

[70]Cf. Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy*: "When shame serves as the glue of a community, the educator in shamelessness such as Socrates dissolves the glue. . . . The indifference to others and the past that this new meaning of shame [as redefined by Socrates] entails undercuts the community." Furthermore, "the unveiling" entailed by Socrates' extreme exercise of frank speech (*parrhēsia*) "may challenge reflexively the conditions that gave rise to it" (117, 125).

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his hands – even if it is his own – just to the extent that he encourages the Athenians to make a scapegoat of him.

Socrates' final remarks in the *Apology* highlight the problem of his responsibility for the outcome of his trial. Readers who assume that Socrates has done no wrong must find it odd when he says that, if the jurors who voted to condemn him pain his sons as he has pained them, "we will have been treated justly by you, both I myself and my sons" (41e–42a). Could this be, if not an equivalent within the *Apology* to the moment of recognition that Aristotle identifies as one of the essential elements of tragic drama, then perhaps an acknowledgment that his own behavior is not wholly unworthy of blame?[71]

Conclusion: Lessons of the Philosophical Soul

The behavior of Socrates at his trial forces us to revise the picture of the erotic philosopher he sketches in other dialogues. In the *Republic*, Socrates presents the philosopher as a lover of wisdom who is powerfully attracted to the contemplation of what is and has little interest in the mundane affairs of public life. He offers a similar characterization of the philosopher in the *Theaetetus*, which records a conversation that takes place just prior to his trial.[72] Socrates' speech in the *Apology,* however, is both aggressive and pointedly political.[73] Nor does he distinguish in his defense speech between philosophizing on the one hand and his practice of examining, exhorting, testing, explaining, and reproaching his fellow citizens on the other; in his account, these activities are one and the same.[74] The *Apology* thus confirms Stanley Rosen's recent suggestion, which he offers on the basis of Socrates' professed admiration for the revolutionary political proposals he sets forth in the *Republic*, that philosophical *erōs* and spiritedness or *thumos* cannot be radically separated.[75] Yet it is important to note that Socrates' *thumos* differs from that of the city in that it is impersonal and is directed against injustice and ignorance; it is thus subordinated to the erotic pursuit of truth and the good.

[71]On the other hand, an anonymous referee suggests that Socrates merely means to say that his accusers will have paid due recompense for their injustice to him by making his sons more just.

[72]See *Rep*. 500b–c, 516c–e with *Tht*. 173c–76a.

[73]Interestingly, neither the word *erōs* nor any of its cognates appears in this dialogue. Yet it is Socrates' erotic desire for wisdom that leads him to respond as he does to the oracle at Delphi. See above, n. 45.

[74]See 29d–e: "I will not cease from philosophizing [*philosophōn*] and exhorting [*parakeleuomenos*] and explaining [*endeiknumenos*]. . . . I will question [*erēsomai*] and examine [*exetasō*] and test [*elengxō*] him, and if he does not seem to me to possess virtue, but says he does, I will reproach [*oneidiō*] him."

[75]Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Republic: A Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 229.

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The desire to expose the falsehood of everyday life is in this sense the flip side, so to speak, of the philosopher's love of truth.

We can now understand why Plato chose to write the *Apology* as a tragedy. Put simply, Socrates' pursuit of truth and justice inevitably runs afoul of the city, because the very existence of Athens as a political community requires a degree of what might be called systemic injustice and therefore also of falsehood. Socrates brings to light a potentially tragic paradox at the heart of any political community: the simultaneous interdependence of, and conflict between, its welfare as a whole and the good of its individual members as human beings. In his speeches and deeds as a philosopher, Socrates exemplifies the fullest achievement of independent reflection, and thus of the examination of life that he regards as necessary for a humanly worthwhile existence. But Socrates also insists on the political relevance of his achievement: he claims to be a gift of the god to the city. For their part, the Athenians readily acknowledge that the well-being of the *polis* depends on the ability of citizens to think for themselves and their willingness to share their thoughts in public.[76] This coincidence of individual and communal goods finds political (as opposed to philosophical) expression in the words of Theseus, a legendary king of Athens, in Euripides' *Suppliants*: "This is the call of freedom: 'What man has good advice to give the city, and wishes to make it known?' He who responds gains glory; the unwilling may hold their peace" (438–41).[77] But the trial of Socrates shows that this coincidence is not absolute. The truth is that the good of the individual as a human being – as an active, reflective center of responsibility, a *self* in the fullest sense – must as a rule be sacrificed to collective utility if the community is to survive. Because this fundamental political truth is morally scandalous, every polity has a legitimate interest in suppressing it. Socrates' real crime is to have clearly and convincingly revealed the secret of this paradox.[78]

One more matter remains to be considered before we can conclude. As a victim of sacrificial violence, the cursed Oedipus was also endowed with the mysterious power to protect the place where he died (*Oedipus at Colonus*, 1760–68). Can Socrates' death convey any similar blessing? Might

[76]Cf. Pericles' remark at Thucydides 2.40.2: "we regard the citizen who takes no part in these duties [of public deliberation] not as unambitious but as useless . . . instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think of it as an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all." Translation from *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

[77]Frank William Jones, trans., *The Suppliant Women*, in Grene and Lattimore, *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, vol. 4.

[78]For alternative formulations of this paradox as it emerges within the context of the *Republic* and the *Statesman*, see Howland, *The Paradox of Political Philosophy* (esp. 272–79).

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the tragedy of the *Apology,* like the sacrificial rituals it reproduces, have healing powers?

The answer depends on how we continue to respond to the fundamental problem to which the *Apology* calls attention. Political communities are constituted by the cooperation of reason and force, persuasion and compulsion, yet these stand together in what is at best a tenuous equilibrium and must be balanced and rebalanced in accordance with the ever-shifting circumstances of human existence. Plato's decision to write dialogues, and to retreat from the marketplace to the Academy, suggests an attempt to preserve an awareness of the issues first brought to light by Socrates while trying to find what his teacher could not – an enduring place for philosophy within the political community. But the problem of balance applies also to the two sides of the philosophical soul. Socrates says at the beginning of the eighth book of the *Republic* that the rulers of the city in speech will be those "who have proved best in philosophy and with respect to war" (543a). As a philosophical warrior, Plato's Socrates refuses to sit idly while ignorance and injustice rule the field; this is why, in Cicero's words, he "call[ed] philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men . . . and compel[led] her to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil."[79] Socrates' carefully scripted performance in the *Apology* suggests that the well-being of philosophers and nonphilosophers alike depends on knowing when to persuade and when to compel, when to talk and when to fight.

[79]*Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J. E. King (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), 5.10–11.

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