

## Discussion Notes

# THE PHILOSOPHIC CONTENT OF THE *APOLOGY*: A JUSTIFICATION OF REASON

Plato's *Apology* has typically emerged from the critical machinery of commentators possessing either little philosophic substance or none at all. And, indeed, what philosophic substance does it possess? Socrates is accused of impiety and corrupting the Athenian youth; he is tried by the Athenians; in spite of a convincing defense he is condemned and sentenced to die. These are the bare bones of the dialogue. Even so imaginative and sympathetic an interpreter of Plato as Allan Bloom can find in them merely the statement of a philosophic problem—the question of how to justify the admission of philosophy into civil society, but not the justification itself.<sup>1</sup> Other commentators have found not even the statement of a philosophic problem: merely a tribute to the character of Socrates<sup>2</sup> or the depiction of injustice done and so on. We can understand, then, and applaud as displaying more candor than the philosophically solemn but empty exegesis of most critics, Gilbert Ryle's simple assertion that "there is no philosophy in . . . the *Apology*."<sup>3</sup> This is certainly the honest thing to say in the circumstances.

It will be our contention in the remainder of this essay that, far from being a philosophic *tabula rasa*, the *Apology* presents, hand in hand, a dialectical justification of dialectic and a demonstration that the world is rational. It contains, therefore, both epistemological and metaphysical argument. It contains, therefore (to put the matter bluntly), philosophy.

If the *Apology*, as we claim, has as its main theme or objective the justification of dialectic, we might not too rashly suppose that the three other dialogues centering on the trial and its outcome, the *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, also do. We might suppose that, with the example of the Athenian dramatists before him, Plato was drawn to conceive Socrates' trial and its outcome in the traditional terms of a tetralogy and hence in terms of four dramatic representations all having the same basic theme.

Taking the "downward way" let us, then, view all four dialogues as dialectical justifications of dialectic *in concreto* and see what we

can uncover. If we need further encouragement for taking this bold step we can find it, I think, in Socrates' cryptic comment in the *Phaedo* (67e) that to do philosophy is to die. The four dialogues in question all have to do with Socrates' death and thus, according to Socrates' cryptic comment, with philosophy. But, witness the outline of the philosopher king's studies in the *Republic*, philosophy, according to Plato, is dialectic. Thus, this equation is suggested: the justification of Socrates' death = the justification of dialectic. Or the same philosophic "pun" might be couched in the biconditional: Socrates' death is justified if and only if dialectic is justified.

Viewed from the perspective of the above equation or biconditional, the *Euthyphro* presents a prefatory, negative justification of dialectic. We are shown the morally perilous condition (Euthyphro's) that we are in when we have no method of inquiry for breaking the hold of self-deceptions, unexamined hypotheses, etc. Since this demonstration is carried out in dialectic (thus Euthyphro is asked for the definition of piety, and his attempted answers are shown to contain contradictions), the particular method of inquiry being justified negatively is, by reflexive implication, dialectic.

Skirting the *Apology* for the moment, we find the *Crito* presenting this *positive* justification of dialectic: we are shown that a dialectical examination of one's relation to the state can provide an answer to questions as morally specific as, Should I escape from jail or not? Moreover, the answer provided is shown to be a better one than is provided by appeals to public or personal sentiment—what might be called the "method of the heart," or "Crito's way."<sup>4</sup>

Finally in the *Phaedo* (99e), as the capstone of the same continuing demonstration, we are presented with an abstract, comparative examination of the nature and foundations of scientific inquiry. This examination, which once more takes place along dialectical lines, reveals that the method of dialectic is the best method of scientific inquiry available to human beings, although not the best conceivable method (the latter would consist in the direct contemplation of the macrocosmic totality, but that, obviously, surpasses human power).

In this rational progression of justifications of dialectic, where does the *Apology* fit in? Well, what has been left out? Clearly, what has been left out has been a refutation of possible objections to dialectic. On the face of it, *this* justification of dialectic should come right after the prefatory and negative justification offered in the *Euthyphro* (which depicts Socrates just before the opening of the trial). For why go on to any positive justifications if unanswerable objections to dialectic exist to begin with? Furthermore, this justification will itself have to be dialectical; for if it were not, then pre-

sumably dialectic would have to be defended by some other method of inquiry, and this necessity would imply that dialectic was not what it is purportedly shown to be in the *Phaedo*: the best and most scientific method of inquiry available to human beings. Does the *Apology*, then, contain a dialectical justification of dialectic directed to what seem to be unanswerable objections to the method? As we shall see, it most assuredly does.

Now it is clear that unless the universe is rational the method of dialectic is not usable. As the very quintessence of human rationality, the method proceeds by asking for hypotheses or definitions and then ruling out any that entail a contradiction. Thus—a sort of philosophic manifesto of Reason—it declares that false hypotheses entail contradictions and that contradictions cannot exist in nature. In a world that was not rational, however, contradictions might exist. Indeed, in a world that was perfectly irrational they would exist by definition. But if contradictions existed, deriving a contradiction from a hypothesis would not demonstrate falsity, since the demonstrated contradiction might after all correspond to reality. In such a world, therefore, truth, if at all attainable, would have to be arrived at through some instrument or method different from dialectic—through, say, “Crito’s way,” or the way of the heart. Dialectic itself could claim to be no more than an idle game of meaningless check-mates.

Now, as the method of dialectic rules out a hypothesis that entails a contradiction, a demonstration that contradictions might exist in nature will rule out dialectic considered as the hypothesis of right method. But this is precisely what the *Apology* appears to demonstrate; indeed, not merely that contradictions *might* exist in nature but that they actually do. Thus, itself, the *Apology* is dialectic. But how does it appear to demonstrate that contradictions exist in nature? In none of his speeches or assertions in the dialogue do we find Socrates presenting any such thesis. In fact, in saying that he takes no interest in inquiries “into things below the earth and in the sky,”<sup>6</sup> Socrates might seem to be abjuring such metaphysical topics.

It is not Socrates in argument but the trial itself—or, more accurately, the trial as understood through the senses, opinion, and feeling—that seems to show that contradictions exist in nature. Thus it is the trial itself that, like a veritable juggernaut of fact, appears to crush dialectic. It should be noted, incidentally, that the trial is located neither below the earth nor in the sky.

The point is: a corollary of the proposition “the world is rational” is the proposition “morality is rational”; and that is to say, moral contradiction does not exist in the world. A moral contradiction would exist, for instance, if the good were bad or justice were injus-

tice. Another kind of moral contradiction would exist if the good received evil; the just, injustice; the evil, good. Thus, if the use of the method of dialectic is to be defended, the proposition "the good do not receive evil" must, for one, be defended—indeed, sustained. In various places in the *Apology*, we might notice, Socrates asserts this very thesis or variations of it. "I do not believe," he says in one place, "that the law of God permits a better man to be harmed by a worse" (30d). And one of his last remarks in the dialogue, directed to his mourning friends, is: "fix your minds on this one belief, which is certain—that nothing can harm a good man either in life or after death" (41d). But while Socrates asserts that the good cannot receive evil, surely the face of the events taking place in the Athenian courtroom is the face of moral contradiction: of the good receiving evil. For example, had there been newspapers in ancient Athens, and had a sympathetic reporter (say Crito) been at the trial, he probably would have headed his account "The Best Receives the Worst" and gone on to explain, "The most just man in Athens, Socrates, having been most unjustly accused (as demonstrated by Socrates himself in cross-examination), was today most unjustly sentenced by the court to suffer the greatest of all evils, death." This, indeed, was the response of Socrates' friends, as depicted in the dialogue. It is the predictable response of any sympathetic reader of the dialogue. In very fact, a good man has received evil! What could be plainer or more certain?

As a defender of dialectic, Plato—or Plato in the mask of Socrates—must meet this strongest conceivable confutation of dialectic, a confutation that seems to be launched from the world itself and not from mere fancy or hypothesis. If he can, then, having met the strongest conceivable ground of objection, he has in effect met all others. One might say: if the outcome of the trial does not contain a moral contradiction, then no moral contradiction conceivably exists in nature (much as one might argue: If I do not know that this is a hand—holding up one's hand before one—then there is no such thing as knowing). This is the far-reaching spearhead of Plato's strategy in the *Apology*.

How does Plato refute the trial's seemingly irrefutable disconfirmation of the proposition "the good receive only good"? In the person of Socrates he offers two arguments. Neither is itself dialectical in character, but, since both are advanced as part of the on-going dialectical argument, what is indicated by their presence is not that dialectic is not the best available method of inquiry but that other methods of inquiry are subordinate to and subserve and are properly guided by dialectic. This unstated implication is given explicit statement in the program of studies of the philosopher king outlined in

the *Republic*.

The first argument neatly (and no doubt intentionally) side-swipes empiricist dogma, having as it does the supernatural as its terminus and induction as its mode. Socrates' "prophetic voice," which has invariably warned him when he has been about to do any wrong or suffer any wrong, has given no such warning at his sentencing. Thus, there is divine but inductive ground for believing that he is receiving good and not evil in being sentenced to die.

The second argument resembles a constructive simple dilemma. In that a dilemma purports to exhaust all possibilities in its disjunction, it may be that this second argument is intended to stand proxy for the kind of arguments that occur in geometry and other mathematical sciences. This argument proceeds: Death is either a dreamless sleep or, consonant with common belief, it is a place where one will meet and converse with the heroes and sages of antiquity. Whether one or the other, death is a great good. Thus, it is a great good, and so, in being sentenced to die, Socrates (the best) has received a great good (not the worst).<sup>7</sup>

According to the theoretical representations<sup>8</sup> of the *Apology*, then, the truth is that, whereas the appearance of the trial is that the best received the worst, the reality is that the best received the best. Thus, instead of the trial proving that the world and morality contain contradiction and are irrational, it appears to confirm their rationality. Thus, the trial's seemingly conclusive confutation of dialectic has been refuted. But the same dialectical inquiry into the trial and its implications has also made it clear that reality must be distinguished from appearance if we are to know what to do and how to live, that appearance springs from sentiment and unexamined opinion, and that one's grasp of reality springs rationally from inductively authenticated sources in the divine and from reason. The *Apology* contains, therefore, not only a metaphysical and epistemological justification of dialectic (as we said at the commencement), but a moral and methodological one, too.

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1. Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 307, 308.

2. See Edith Hamilton, Preface to "Socrates's Defense," *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Bollingen Series LXXI (henceforth: Bollingen Series (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1961): "Socrates never condemned. This significant clue to what he was is given most clearly in Socrates' Defense" (p. 3).

3. Gilbert Ryle, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967), s.v. "Plato": "There is no philosophy in the *Menexenus*, the *Apology*, or the *Critias*" (6: 319).

4. Crito's appeal to public sentiment, or "what people will think," is impossible to miss. His appeal to his own sentiments or feelings is less obvious; but see *Crito* (Bollingen Series), trans. Tredennick, Crito speaking: "I have often *felt* before in the course of my life. . ." (43b); "Besides, Socrates, I don't even feel that it is right for you. . ." (45c); and Socrates' ironic "appreciation" of Crito's warm feelings (46b) (*italics added*).

5. See also, *The Republic*, 534d.

6. *Apology* (Bollingen Series, "Socrates' Defense"), trans. Tredennick, 19b-d.

7. For the two arguments, see *Apology* 40a-c and 40c-41c.

8. Dialectic proceeds, according to Plato, through theoretic, not sensuous, representations. "So I decided that I must have recourse to theories, and use them in trying to discover the truth about things. Perhaps my illustration is not quite apt, because I do not at all admit that an inquiry by means of theory employs images any more than one which confines itself to facts" (*Phaedo*, Bollingen Series, 994).