Notes on Plato's *Apology of Socrates*

1. Background
    a. The Setting: Ancient Athens
        i. ὅτι μὲν ὑμεῖς, ὦ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, πεπόνθατε ὑπὸ τῶν ἐμῶν
        κατηγόρων, οὐκ
        οἶδα: ἐγὼ δ᾽ οὖν καὶ αὐτὸς ὑπ᾽ αὐτῶν ὀλίγου ἐμαυτοῦ ἐ πελαθόμην,
        οὕτω πιθανῶς ἔλεγον.
        ii. Those are the opening words of Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, at least in the version of it we have now. For most of us, I'd presume, these words don't sound terribly familiar. Our ears are not attuned to the Attic dialect spoken by most ancient Athenians. But how ancient was this Athens of Socrates? How far away from us was it, chronologically speaking? And how does that chronological distance relate to the conceptual distance between us and Socrates? In other words: does the length of time between us make it harder for us to get a grip on what these ancient Greek figures were arguing about?
        iii. Perhaps a brief timeline can help us begin to fathom the number of years we're talking about here. We'll work backwards.
            1. 2015 CE—Today
            2. 1997 CE—Average Freshman's Birth Year
            3. 1969 CE—First Internet Prototype (ARPANet) Goes Online
            4. 1939 CE—World War II Breaks Out
            5. 1914 CE—World War I Breaks Out
            6. 1865 CE—End of the American Civil War
            7. 1776 CE—America's Declaration of Independence
            8. 1492 CE—Columbus Crosses the Atlantic
            9. 1440 CE—Invention of Printing Press
            10. 1000 CE—Leif Erikson Crosses the Atlantic
            11. 632 CE—Death of Muhammad
            12. 476 CE—Fall of Western Roman Empire
            13. 0 CE—Birth of Jesus of Nazareth (maybe!)
            14. 44 BCE—Assassination of Julius Caesar
            15. 323 BCE—Death of Alexander the Great

16. 399 BCE—Death of Socrates (after the events depicted in the *Apology*)

iv. 2414 years—that's a long time. Think of all of the events that have taken place since then. Aside from the innumerable, almost unnoticeable shifts in our everyday lives, we can make note of these seemingly huge changes in the history of the world. At the time of Socrates' death, there was obviously no internet. There weren't any printed books. There was no Christianity, no Islam. The Roman Empire didn't even exist yet. The life and times of Socrates took place in a world without any of those familiar touchstones. It was a world that can and should strike us as a bit strange, a bit foreign.

v. And yet the world of Socrates might not seem entirely foreign to us. We can still make sense of it, if only in an imperfect, imaginative way. Socrates lived in Athens, a port city on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. (Look it up on Google Maps!) By the time he was born—about 470 BCE—Athens was already an influential city in the region, trading with other cities across the water and building up its economic power.

vi. With economic power came military power. By the time Socrates was born, an uneasy alliance of Greek cities had already repelled the powerful Persian Empire and established some measure of independence. (In other words: the events of *300*—taking place in 480-479 BCE—had already taken place.) According to the usual story, that victory kicked off a 'Golden Age' for Athens. During that age, leaders like Pericles led Athens to imperial supremacy over most of the other Greek cities.

vii. Pericles' Athens (ca. 461-429 BCE) was not a completely tyrannical empire, however. He also encouraged the growth of Athenian democracy. Under this democratic regime, citizens could take a more direct role in governing the city, influencing policies, and—most important for our purposes—conducting trials. Even though we call this form of government 'democracy,' we shouldn't confuse it with America's current form of democracy. In Athens, only free men—usually free men of a certain status—could vote or govern or serve on a jury. Women, slaves, foreigners, and other undesirables were kept out of the functioning of this democracy.

viii. This so-called 'Golden Age' didn't last forever, of course. It didn't even last for all of Socrates' life. He lived through tumultuous times. In 431 BCE, war broke out between Athens and its

longtime rival among the other Greek cities: Sparta. The fighting would continue on and off until 404 BCE. To put it simply: Sparta won.

ix. After the Spartan victory in this 'Peloponnesian War,' Athens fell into political turmoil. The old democracy of Pericles gave way to new rule by the Thirty Tyrants. This group constituted what we call an oligarchy: rule by a few powerful, usually rich men.

x. But this rule by tyrants ended almost as soon as it began. Democracy was restored in 403 BCE. Still, it loomed large in the minds of many Athenians: oligarchy and tyranny could return at any moment. Democracy had to be defended vigorously if it was going to survive. It didn't help Socrates that he was often linked both to some of the aristocratic families involved in the oligarchy and to those who continued to criticize the democratic system.

xi. By 399 BCE, the time of Socrates' trial and execution, Athens was thus a democratic city recovering from a long war that ended in defeat. We should keep this setting in mind as we turn to the character of Socrates and the events leading up to his death.

b. The Main Character: Socrates

i. Basics

1. In general, we remember Socrates today as perhaps the main turning point in the history of philosophy. Of course, there were philosophers before Socrates. Outside of Greece, cultures in India, China, and the Middle East had long legacies of learning about the natural and moral world. Even within Greek-speaking society, there were figures before Socrates whom we'd count as philosophers: Thales, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and so on.
2. In Socrates' own time, as well, he wasn't the only man known for his 'wisdom.' Athens and other Greek cities seemed to have been teeming with wise men, wandering from place to place, dispensing their knowledge to whoever wanted to hear it—or pay for it. In general, these men were known as 'Sophists,' from the Greek word for wisdom: *Sophia*.
3. So: does that mean Socrates was a Sophist? He was certainly something of a street sage, hanging out in the marketplace (*agora*) of Athens and interrogating anyone who would listen about topics like virtue, justice, and religion. Yet, in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates tries to make it

pretty clear that he's no Sophist. He's not like those other guys. For one thing, he never takes any money!

ii. How do we know who he was?
    1. But the question remains: how do we know that the Socrates of Plato's *Apology* is 'the real' Socrates? The text of the *Apology* doesn't seem to have been written by Socrates himself. In fact, we have no writings by Socrates himself whatsoever. Instead, what we have are reports of what he (might have) said.
    2. This might seem like a bit of a pointless question, if the only evidence we had of Socrates was found in Plato's writings and dialogues. But that's not actually the case. We do have other documents that attest to the historical figure of Socrates. But the strange thing is that Socrates doesn't always seem like the same character, depending on which source we're looking at.

iii. Plato's Socrates vs. Other Socrateses
    1. Aside from Plato's Socrates, we have two main competing views of what Socrates was really like. The first comes courtesy of an author named Xenophon. The second comes from the comedic plays of a playwright named Aristophanes.
    2. Xenophon, like Plato, wrote admiringly of Socrates as an accomplished philosopher. Both authors even wrote dialogues of the same name—Symposium—depicting Socrates engaged with friends in a philosophical conversation that was also a bout of drinking. Xenophon's portrayal Socrates, while still interesting in its own way, has not been as popular as Plato's over the centuries. In some ways, this may be because Xenophon's Socrates dispenses some pretty straightforward advice about knowledge and virtue. He's not a Sophist—he doesn't take money!—but the kind of advice he gives doesn't really seem all that different from what a Sophist would say.
    3. Aristophanes, on the other hand, gives us a version of Socrates that is radically different from that of Plato. In his comedic play *The Clouds*, Aristophanes depicts Socrates as a pie-in-the-sky intellectual who makes wild claims and demands payment from the gullible young students in Athens. With his head in the clouds, Socrates tends to go around claiming to have secret knowledge about the natural

world—what lies above the sky and below the earth, as the Greeks would say. (Aristophanes made this painfully evident by having the actor portraying Socrates enter the scene while suspending from a crane from above, as if he were descending from the heavens.) What's worse, he also teaches young Greeks how to make the weaker of two arguments sound like the stronger one, and vice versa. This makes rhetoric—the art of persuading people—more powerful than simply honesty and truth-telling. The result is that Socrates is not only an absurd fool, but perhaps also a dangerous influence.

4. Plato seems to have had a strong negative reaction to Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates. As a student of Socrates, Plato wanted to defend his former teacher not only against the charge of being a fool, but even more so against the charge of being a bad influence on the people of Athens. It is this charge of 'corrupting the youth,' after all, that seems to have led to Socrates' political and legal troubles.
5. But who was this Plato guy? Why should we take his word over that of Xenophon or Aristophanes? Well, to answer the first question: it's tough for us to know who Plato truly was. We know he was a student of Socrates. We know he wrote a good number of philosophical texts, many of which were dialogues between Socrates and other notable characters from the Athens of that time (including Plato's own brothers!). And we also think that, despite his admiration for Socrates, he probably brought in a number of other philosophical influences when it came time to think up his own questions and arguments.
6. And that leads us to the second question: why trust Plato? Well, perhaps it's not really a question of trust here. We read Plato's version of Socrates not because we absolutely know that he was telling us how Socrates really was, but because Plato's dialogues have stood the test of time as philosophically interesting texts. That is: Plato's Socrates can challenge us to rethink our presumptions and ask new kinds of questions, questions that never occurred to us before. In short, Plato's Socrates can help teach us how to think.

7. To let ourselves be challenged and taught by Plato's Socrates, then, we should turn from all of this contextual information and take a closer look at the actual text we have in our hands: the *Apology*.

c. The Event: Trial & Defense
   i. What was an Athenian trial like?
      1. Now that we have some of this historical information about Athens on the table, we can zero in more closely on the specific event depicted in Plato's *Apology*.
      2. Remember: in 399 BCE, Athens was a democracy (again). This meant that juries at a trial were supposed to represent the general population of citizens. From the entire population of free males over the age of thirty, about 500 were chosen to serve as a jury in Socrates' case. That's a lot, by our standards.
      3. Juries were responsible for both judging and sentencing the defendants in a trial. There was no separate judge in charge of one or the other. Given the large amount of people involved, the sentencing process was simplified: once the jury had decided the defendant was guilty, both the prosecuting side and the defending side would offer up their own recommended sentences. Then the jury would choose between the two. We see this depicted at the end of the *Apology*.
      4. Given that this kind of jury system was deeply democratic, based on a principle of representation and involving so many citizens, the charge that Socrates was somehow undermining Athenian democracy from within should strike us as especially grave. Socrates was in many ways being judged by the very system he was accused of attacking.
   ii. What is an *apologia*?
      1. The text of what we call the *Apology* is made up of what the Greeks called an *apologia*. This does not mean an 'apology' in the sense of 'apologizing' for something. As should become clear as we read his words, Socrates is not saying sorry. More literally, an apologia was a defense of something—such as the speech a defendant might give at his own trial.
      2. And that is what we have before us in our reading: Socrates' speech defending himself to the jury at his own

trial. Over the course of his oration, he addresses not only the members of the jury (men of Athens—the body of democratic citizens), but also his own accusers: Meletus, Anytus, Lycon. If we understand this, we can start to picture a more vivid 'courtroom-like' setting for the words on the page.

3. Once again, though, the question arises: is this was Socrates really said? Does Plato's account of Socrates' *apologia* accurately represent what was really said on that fateful day in 399 BCE? We cannot know if it does or doesn't. And yet, we do not know that the questions and arguments posed by Plato's Socrates in this text continue to give us pause and make us think today. And so our attention should be placed on what Socrates is saying in this text, rather than what he might have said in real life.

d. The Prelude: *Euthyphro*
    i. *Euthyphro* as stage-setting within the larger 'plot'
        1. Finally, to help us get an even better handle on the scene taking place in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, we can look to another Platonic dialogue: the *Euthyphro*. Even though we don't entirely know when each dialogue was written, we do know that the *Euthyphro* comes earlier in the 'story' of Socrates' last days than does the *Apology*. This is because, in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates runs into the title character while going to the law courts for his own trial. Euthyphro is surprised to bump into Socrates there, since he considers him to be an intellectual man with little interest in the day-to-day business of legal cases.
        2. In addition to the *Euthyphro* and the *Apology*, two other dialogues complete our picture of the last days of Socrates. The *Crito* takes place following the *Apology*, with the *Phaedo* coming along after that. Since (spoiler alert!) Socrates is found guilty and sentenced to death at the end of the *Apology*, the *Crito* then consists mostly of his friends trying to convince him to escape before his execution. This leads to a discussion about whether it is ever just or lawful to break the laws, even when they seem unjust.
        3. Finally, there comes the *Phaedo*. In this dialogue, which we'll read later on in the semester, Socrates' companions talk with him about death. The trial is over. The sentence has been passed. And Socrates has refused escape by any

means. So he must die, and he seems quite willing to accept that fact. This confuses and concerns his friends, which leads to a lengthy discussion about death, life, and the immortality of the soul.

ii. *Euthyphro* as indicative of the aporetic Socrates

1. But setting aside all of these details of Socrates' last days, we can take one last look at the *Euthyphro*. In this brief dialogue, we can get a taste for how Plato's Socrates operated.
2. At the beginning of the dialogue, as we said, Socrates runs into the character of Euthyphro outside the law courts. While Socrates is there to defend himself at his own trial, Euthyphro is there to prosecute his own father. But why would he do that? Well, it turns out Euthyphro's father had killed one of their servant workers who had already killed someone else.
3. Euthyphro's family is horrified that he would help prosecute his own father. They call that act 'impious' (*anosion*): perhaps somewhere between irreligious and unjust. Euthyphro, however, considers himself rather educated and claims that his family is mistaken about what is pious and what is impious. He, however, has the correct idea about what it means to be pious. And so he's quite confident that his prosecution of his own father is the pious thing to do.
4. Socrates isn't so sure. It's not that he necessarily has a better idea of what's pious or not. Rather, he's suspicious about how confident Euthyphro is in his own assessment of piety. Still, the two do agree about some things, such as that the gods love pious acts. But then Socrates asks the younger man: do the gods love pious acts because those acts are pious? Or are those acts pious simply because the gods love them?
5. Long story short: these questions posed by Socrates don't lead to a final agreement between him and Euthyphro about what piety is. They do not seem to be meant to lead to such a conclusion. Rather, they lead to an impasse, what the Greeks called an *aporia*. That might seem anticlimactic. Perhaps it is. But it also teaches us a lesson about being overly presumptuous when it comes to deciding what is pious and what is not, what gods love and what they don't,

or what is just and what is unjust. And it's those kinds of supposed certainties that Socrates wants us to put into question, as he makes clear from his self-defense in the *Apology*.

2. Opening Remarks (17a-18e)
    a. Not Knowing
        i. "I do not know, men of Athens, how my accusers affected you; as for me, I was almost carried away in spite of myself, so persuasively did they speak. And yet, hardly anything of what they said is true." (17a)
        ii. These are the opening lines of Socrates' speech in defense of himself before a jury of his peers. They deserve our attention. We should first note that he begins not by claiming access to knowledge, but by professing ignorance. "I do not know"—the Greek *ouk oida* comes at the end of the clause, but we can probably still assume some emphasis here—this is how he chooses to begin. Why? As we'll see later in the speech, rumors about Socrates' special claim to knowledge are not always well-founded. At the least, they're often overly simplistic. Any claim to "truth" he might have has to be held together with this original claim about his own ignorance.
    b. Persuasion and Truth
        i. These first lines also draw an initial distinction between two kinds of speaking. There is speaking aimed at persuading, as shown by Socrates' accusers. And then there is speaking aimed at truth-telling—honesty, perhaps?—which Socrates wants his own speech to embody.
        ii. Of course, we could stop here to ask: what kind of speaking counts most in a trial setting? On the one hand, we would hope that the trial aims to bring the truth to light, to discern the guilty from the innocent in actual fact. On the other hand, we'd have to admit that a persuasive speaker stands a much better chance of winning the trial than does the unpersuasive speaker. And so, even if truth should be paramount, persuasion has to play a central role in the court of law. Socrates is taking a risky move by opening with an attack on persuasive rhetoric.
        iii. For his part, Socrates will not make use of the ornate oratory forged in rhetorical training and polished in political activity. Instead, from his mouth will come "things spoken at random and expressed in the first words that come to mind." (17c) He's going

to speak off the cuff, not in the language of the law courts or even of the assembly, but rather in the marketplace chatter of the *agora*.

iv. Yet Socrates' claims here raise another question, the question of sincerity. How sincere is Socrates being here? Is he really going to be speaking at random? Or is he merely using the idea of spontaneity to conceal a deeper plan, a deeper chain of reasoning? Even if he didn't literally write down his speech beforehand, how do we know that his seemingly off-the-cuff delivery isn't just another kind of rhetorical ploy? How do we tell the difference between truly spontaneous speech and the stylistic imitation of spontaneity? (Here we're playing devil's advocate on behalf of Socrates' accusers.)

v. We shouldn't neglect to mention that this distinction between persuasion and truth maps nicely onto the broader distinction between the so-called Sophists and the anti-Sophist Socrates. This takes us a bit beyond the text, for now, but it can nevertheless be instructive. It was the Sophists who, according to Plato's negative account, traveled the cities of Greece dispensing advice about how to convince listeners and thereby gain influence. Truth was a side-issue. The point was not necessarily to speak most truthfully, but to speak most convincingly. Power came through persuasion, not necessarily through honesty. Here, Socrates is positioning himself against that kind of pedagogy. This might then be a shrewd opening move, given that many of his enemies—e.g., Aristophanes—would say that it's Socrates' sophistry that makes him so dangerous to the *polis* of Athens.

vi. Socrates ends his opening section on truth and persuasion by reminding the jury what their duty is. Or it might be more accurate to say: he reminds them what their "excellence" is. The word translated as "excellence" here is *aretē*, which is often translated elsewhere as "virtue." "Excellence" is a helpful translation, though, since it clears our head of any overly moralizing notions of virtue. The Greek *aretē* can certainly include moral virtue, but it goes well beyond that. The *aretē* of a pack-horse, for example, is that it carries a heavy burden without fail.

vii. The *aretē* of a jury or a judge, then, has to do with their excellence in judging. As Socrates puts it: "concentrate your attention on whether what I say is just or not, for the excellence of a judge lies in this, as that of a speaker lies in telling the truth." (18a) Socrates' chosen form of speaking is then not just more honest than the persuasive words of his opponents, but also more excellent or

virtuous—precisely because the excellence or virtue of speech is telling the truth. (At least, this is what Socrates argues…)

c. Two Generations of Accusers
    i. Socrates' opening remarks conclude with a preview of the accusations he is about to respond against. As he tells us right away, these accusations derive from two main sources, two generations of accusers. First there was a group of older men who had always found Socrates to be a thorn in their side. They laid the groundwork for his bad reputation, most effectively by telling their children that Socrates was a terrible influence. Then came the younger, more recent accusers, whose accusations have led to Socrates' legal troubles and the current trial.
    ii. Socrates next tells us that he will address each of these generations of accusers in turn. Because they came first and laid the groundwork, the older generation of men will be his first target. After that, he'll move on to the younger prosecutors. Here he mentions only Anytus, (18b) although later we'll also hear about Meletus and Lycon.
    iii. According to Socrates, the content of the first batch of accusations was contained in what they told their children: "they got hold of most of you from childhood, persuaded you and accused me quite falsely, saying that there is a man called Socrates, a wise man, a student of all things of the sky and below the earth, who makes the worse argument the stronger. Those who spread that rumor, gentlemen, are my dangerous accusers, for their hearers believe that those who study these things do not even believe in the gods." (18b-c)
    iv. We can perhaps divide this initial accusation into a series of three:
        1. Socrates (illegitimately) investigates natural, supernatural, and sub-natural topics
            a. "things of the sky and below the earth"
        2. Socrates inverts the logical force of arguments
            a. "the worse argument the stronger"
        3. Implicitly, Socrates does not believe in the traditional gods
    v. The first attack seems to insinuate that Socrates is not using his intelligence for practical, civically minded activities. Instead, he's coming up with wild theories about nature and even trying to peer behind the curtain into whatever lies beyond the visible world.
    vi. The second attack has to do with Socrates' use of language. He appears to twist words in order to confuse the people he's talking to and throw them into confusion. They no longer understand

what they were trying to say or what they meant. Again: rather than teaching students how to speak well in public and motivate their fellow citizens, he's using language to undermine people's self-confidence in their own values and presumptions.

vii. Finally, the implicit climax of these attacks is that Socrates is undermining tradition—not just the political traditions of the city (the assembly, the law courts), but even the religious traditions embodied by the gods. This is an especially severe accusation. Socrates himself seems to treat it with a somber solemnity. Even though there doesn't seem to be much explicit evidence that Socrates was undermining civil religion, the claims about illegitimate natural investigations and perverted forms of argumentation are meant to lead us in this direction of "impiety." (Recall the *Euthyphro*…)

viii. In the denouement of his opening remarks, Socrates complains that he can't refer to this first generation of accusers by name. This is because, unlike Anytus and Meletus and Lycon, they are not plaintiffs in the current court case. It would therefore be unlawful—perhaps libelous?—to drag their names through the mud. So Socrates will have to press on in a rather general, vague sort of way. He laments the seeming injustice that comedy writers—like Aristophanes—get to trash people's reputations by using their actual names, while he cannot even mention his enemies' names to save his own life.

3. The First Set of Accusations (19a-23e)
    a. No Special Knowledge About Nature
        i. With 19a, we see Socrates transitioning from his opening remarks to the actual substance of his speech in defense of himself. As he puts it: "let the matter proceed as the god may wish, but I must obey the law and make my defense." (19a) Note here the reference to "the god," which could just be an everyday turn of phrase, but could also foreshadow some of Socrates' theological claims to come.
        ii. In response to the first claim, about studying things in the sky and below the earth, Socrates claims utter ignorance. He calls out Aristophanes by name, blaming the depiction of himself in *The Clouds* for much of his current reputation. That version of Socrates lays claim either to special knowledge about nature (everything is really made out of air! Etc.) or even about supernatural realities (gods and so on).

iii. Socrates' defense here is to point to the jury's own experience encountering him in person: "I do not speak in contempt of such knowledge—lest Meletus bring more cases against me—but, gentlemen, I have no part in it, and on this point I call upon the majority of you as witnesses. I think it right that all those of you who have heard me conversing, and many of you have, should tell each other if any one of you has ever heard me discussing such subjects to any extent at all." (19c-d)

iv. Socrates' rejoinder here is surprisingly empirical. He has no high-minded argument to make concerning such high-minded knowledge. Instead, he asks his fellow citizens to think back on their own interactions with him. He's asking them to put some distance between his reputation—ruined by Aristophanes and Meletus and other accusers—and his actual conduct in their presence.

v. In addition to that, Socrates seems to swallow the second accusation—making the weaker argument into the stronger (19b)—into the first accusation. It's as if this accusation of inverting arguments is tied directly to the accusation concerning natural and supernatural knowledge. Because of that, his plea to the jury to think back on their personal encounters is also aimed at countering the second accusation.

b. $ophistry

i. Of course, making the weaker argument sound stronger is what the Sophists were known for—and Socrates doesn't want the jury to think of him as a Sophist! He makes that very clear in his next set of comments.

ii. Somewhat surprisingly, however, his main complaint now is the idea that people think he takes money for teaching students: "And if you have heard from anyone that I undertake to teach people and charge a fee for it, that is not true either." (19d) This is not something that's listed in the original slate of accusations. (Doth he protest too much?) Yet, for Socrates, the issue of payment seems to be indelibly linked to that of sophistry and, therefore, of guilt.

iii. His next move is to throw a number of 'real' Sophists under the bus—Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias. These are the bad eggs. These are the false teachers coming into Athens—often from abroad, these foreign outsiders—and bilking young men out of their money. (19e) Here it almost seems like Socrates doesn't necessarily disagree with his accusers when it comes to the

possibility that sophistic teaching corrupts the youth and undermines the city. It's just that he himself is not one of those guilty corruptors!

iv. One of the most egregious cases of sophistry, Socrates tell us, has to do with Evenus of Paros, whose teaching services were paid for at great cost by the Athenian Callias, on behalf of his own sons. Callias paid Evenus five minas, which was equivalent to 500 drachmas. Given that the average laborer made about one drachma per day, this was a decent wage.

v. So what was it that Evenus professed to teach Callias? It was, in Socrates' words, the content of human excellence—again, *aretē*. More specifically, this was a kind of social or political excellence— *aretē politikē*. (20b) In Socrates' eyes, access to this kind of human-political virtue would indeed be worth a tidy sum. His sarcasm, however, indicates that he doesn't think Evenus actually capable of teaching others to be virtuous or excellent in this way. Less sarcastically, he makes it clear that he himself is incapable of doing so as well (and he's never claiming to be able to!): "Certainly I would pride and preen myself if I had this knowledge, but I do not have it, gentlemen." (20c)

c. The Source of Rumors

i. Having defended himself from charges of (super-)natural knowledge, perversion of arguments, and plain old sophistry, Socrates next anticipates a possible counterpoint. If Socrates doesn't have special knowledge about the world, if he doesn't use language to destabilize arguments, if he doesn't take money for his services, then—why is he at trial? Where do all of these accusations come from? Out of thin air?

ii. Socrates admits that there might be some reasons that these accusations have arisen. That's not to say that they're well-grounded. Rather, certain events may have taken place which, if misunderstood, could have led certain enemies to form negative notions about Socrates' lifestyle and occupation.

iii. In order to repair his reputation against such slander, Socrates begins to tell his own story: "Perhaps some of you will think I am jesting, but be sure that all that I shall say is true. What has caused my reputation is none other than a certain kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom? Human wisdom, perhaps. It may be that I really possess this, while those whom I mentioned just now are wise with a wisdom more than human; else I cannot explain it, for I

certainly do not possess it, and whoever says I do is lying and speaks to slander me." (20d-e)

iv. So: after all of his claims of ignorance regarding certain kinds of naturalistic, rhetorical, and sophistic knowledge, Socrates does admit that he may have access to a certain kind of wisdom. It's not supernatural or godly wisdom, he's quick to point out. He's not talking about what's above the sky or below the earth. He's talking merely about human wisdom. But we'll have to be patient and read on before rushing to determine what exactly this "human wisdom" means…

d. Chaerephon's Posthumous Testimony
   i. It seems that, at this point in Socrates' defense speech, the members of the jury began to murmur (perhaps shout!) against him. Maybe it looked to them like Socrates was finally getting ready to show off the hubris and pride that got him in trouble in the first place.
   ii. To quiet them down, Socrates says he's going to tell them a story—not a story that originates with himself, but a story told by another man, the trustworthy Chaerephon. Unfortunately, Chaerephon is dead, but Socrates assures the jury that the dead man's brother can corroborate the whole story. (How convinced do you think they were?)
   iii. Socrates' attempts to quiet the jury down should seem a bit comical after he makes his next move, which is to tell them about how Chaerephon learned of Socrates' special wisdom from none other than the god Apollo! Says Socrates: "He [Chaerephon] went to Delphi at one time and ventured to ask the oracle—as I say, gentlemen, do not create a disturbance—he asked if any man was wiser than I, and the Pythian replied that no one was wiser." (21a)
   iv. Now, this was a rather bold claim. The "oracle" Socrates was referring to was the Pythia: a priestess at the Temple dedicated to Apollo at Delphi. Under the right conditions, people could travel to Delphi and ask the oracle certain questions. In response, she would often give prophecies, which were interpreted as words coming from the god Apollo himself. Socrates is claiming for himself a powerful patron here.
   v. When Chaerephon returned to tell Socrates of this prophecy, Socrates couldn't believe it. If it meant that he was somehow wiser than other people, he couldn't understand why. He didn't feel like that was the case at all. In his own words: "Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very conscious that I

am not wise at all; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest? For surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do so." (21b)

e. Devising a Test
    i. Not one to stay still or satisfied in confusion, Socrates next devised a plan. He would go around Athens testing out different men who were said to be wise. By talking to them and asking them questions, he would be able to figure out if he was indeed wiser than them (which would indeed be surprising).
    ii. First, he went to a politician. Everyone though this great statesman possessed exceptional wisdom. But when Socrates interrogated him, he was left with the following impression: "I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not." (21c-d)
    iii. Here Socrates is opening up a gap between appearance and being, between what seems to be the case and what actually is. Wisdom, in his estimation, only counts if someone actually has it, not if they merely appear to have it. The politician lets Socrates down precisely because he only has a veneer of wisdom. Deep down, he's not much different from anyone else.
    iv. Even after testing out just this one man, Socrates begins to acquire a new perspective on the oracle's proclamation. He thought to himself, "I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know." (21d)
    v. Now we can begin to catch a glimpse of Socrates' more nuanced interpretation of Apollo's prophecy. The point is not that he, Socrates, possesses huge amounts of special wisdom. Rather, his 'wisdom' mostly consists in not assuming that he knows a bunch of things that he doesn't in fact know. His wisdom lies in his caution, his reflection, his questioning, not in rushing to claim all knowledge for himself.

f. Testing the Rest
    i. After quizzing the politician, Socrates turns to other members of society who might be said to have wisdom. He frames this testing as a kind of divine mission—an "investigation in the service of the god." (22a) What he begins to find is that those who have the biggest reputation for wisdom tend to have the least, while those

with less of a reputation tend to have a surprising amount of human wisdom.

ii. After the politicians, then, he turns to the poets. Almost immediately, he determines that poets don't know what they're talking about, for the most part. Even though they can create great works of art that move us so deeply, they can barely explain what they're doing or what it means. In that way, they're more like "seers and prophets," moved by inspiration rather than knowledge. (22b-c)

iii. After the poets come the craftsmen. To a certain extent, the craftsmen do possess an impressive array of knowledge. But their knowledge is technical—that is, it has to do with their specific crafts. A great carpenter has an amazing amount of knowledge about carpentry—but that doesn't necessarily mean they know more in general. Socrates is concerned about the human propensity to take skill (*techne*) in one field as indicative of wisdom more broadly. He calls this a plain "error." (22c-d)

g. Socrates' Findings

i. After quizzing the politicians, the poets, the craftsmen, and many other men of Athens, Socrates begins to refine his interpretation of Apollo's prophecy. Whereas everyone else thought he was just trying to make himself look smart by making others look dumb, he was actually discovering a deeper truth about the chasm between divine and human wisdom.

ii. As Socrates puts it: "in each case the bystanders thought that I myself possessed the wisdom that I proved that my interlocutor did not have. What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, Socrates, he is using my name as an example, as if he said, 'This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless.'" (23a-b)

iii. For a human, then, to be 'wise' may just be to recognize the limits and shortcomings of one's own wisdom. In its beginnings, at least, Socrates' wisdom is more negative than it is positive. That is: he is wiser because he knows that he does not know everything.

h. Transitioning to the Current Case

i. After defending his modified claim to human wisdom, Socrates then returns to this idea that his accusers fall into two generational categories. He has so far been responding to the first generation, who had a problem with him specifically. This is most likely

because they were the people he would originally interrogate in the streets in order to prove how unwise they really were. Socrates' divinely ordained testing mission didn't win him that many friends, at least among this powerful group of men.

ii. But now Socrates wants to turn to the matter at hand: the claims made against him by his more recent accusers, those who've actually brought the trial against him to court. These men are younger and so they tend to know Socrates either by reputation or through Socrates' own students. Again, it's a generational issue.

iii. Given the vicious groundwork laid by the first batch of accusers, this second generation has an almost inborn distaste for Socrates and his claims about wisdom (which they surely misunderstand). They are led by three main plaintiffs (23e):

1. Meletus (representing the poets)
2. Anytus (representing the craftsmen and politicians)
3. Lycon (representing the orators)

iv. All three of these young men, and many members of the jury too, have been conditioned to hate Socrates by all the old slander about him. Socrates is doubtful that he can overcome all that slander with one speech, but he's not going to go out lying down, regardless: "I should be surprised if I could rid you of so much slander in so short a time. That, men of Athens, is the truth for you. I have hidden or disguised nothing. I know well enough that this very conduct makes me unpopular, and this is proof that what I say is true, that such is the slander against me, and that such are its causes." (24a-b)

4. Addressing Meletus' Accusations (24b-30b)
   a. Corrupting the Young and Disbelieving in the Gods
      i. At the beginning of 24b, Socrates makes it very clear that he's now moving away from the matter of the earlier generation of accusers. He's shifting to address the specific accusations of Meletus (and Anytus and Lycon), which are what's actually at stake in this trial. Instead of defending himself against general charges and a bad reputation, Socrates is now zeroing in on his opponents' "sworn deposition." (24b)
      ii. And the content of that deposition is this: "Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things." (24b-c)
      iii. Again, let's break down the charges:
         1. Socrates corrupts the young
         2. Socrates does not believe in the city's traditional gods

3. Socrates believes in strange new spiritual realities

iv. Here we should pause to note two quick connections:
   1. Almost immediately, the question of Socrates' philosophical claims turns into a political issue. The Greek word for city is *polis*, which is where we get our own vocabulary for talking about civic matters: politics, political, politician, and so on. Socrates' teaching (or corrupting) of young men is almost immediately linked to its "political" consequences for the city.
   2. In addition to that, the philosophical and political aspects of these accusations are immediately linked to a religious problem. Socrates is somehow undermining the traditional gods—Zeus, Apollo, etc.—in favor of some unnamed new "spiritual things." (The Greek here is *daimonia*, related to our word 'demon'—although there is not necessarily a negative or devilish connotation here. *Daimon* denotes a spiritual being—usually a child of a god—without reference to its goodness or badness.)
   3. And to tie these two connections together: Socrates' impiety is supposedly directed at the god 'of the city.' That is: the religious accusation against him is also a part of the political accusation against him. Like philosophy, religion is not a matter separated out from politics. All three—philosophy, religion, politics—are intimately intertwined.

b. Who Improves the Youth?
   i. After naming the accusations against him, Socrates immediately launches into a counter-attack. He aims to reveal to the jury just how frivolous these charges are. And he will do so first by posing a series of question to one of his accusers, Meletus. Here Socrates is turning the tables somewhat, forcing Meletus to explain himself before his peers—just as Socrates has to do in his own defense.
   ii. Socrates' aim in questioning Meletus is to show that his accuser doesn't actually care about the virtue of young Athenians or matters of philosophy more broadly. Meletus may couch his own position in high-minded terms, but Socrates wants to say that that's all for show. A bit of interrogation should suffice to show that, deep down, Meletus hasn't thought much at all about the matters at hand.
   iii. At this point, the voice of Meletus begins to appear in the text. Although something of a dialogue begins here, our version of the

text doesn't adopt a script-like format. It merely represents Meletus' response after a dash, following Socrates' question.

iv. The first question Socrates asks is a loaded one: "Surely you consider it of the greatest importance that our young men be as good as possible?" (24d) "Indeed I do!" replies Meletus. The problem, of course, is that Meletus thinks Socrates, far from improving the youth, actually corrupts the youth whom he's supposedly helping.

v. But, asks Socrates, if I corrupt the youth, then who improves them? What standard am I being held up against? When pressed to reveal 'who' is actually capable of improving youth Athenians, Meletus responds: "the laws." (24d-e)

vi. Socrates is not satisfied with that answer. He wants to know "who" improves the youth, not "what." The laws alone can't do much without an interpreter, someone to help young people learn what the laws really mean.

vii. So who is it that has knowledge of the laws? The jury, perhaps? And probably the audience in the court of law, as well. And then the government, ruling powers like the Assembly and the more rarefied Council—they know the laws fairly well, don't they? After Meletus has agreed to all this, Socrates gets him to agree also that "all the Athenians" know the laws and can therefore improve young men by training them in the laws. (25a) Thus it's only Socrates that corrupts young men, while basically everyone else in Athens is capable of improving them. How unlucky for Socrates!

viii. The point Socrates is getting at here seems to be this: it doesn't seem likely that the vast majority of people in a city would be capable of improving the youth of that city. Rather, it seems much more likely that there would be a smaller group of people—e.g., teachers—who would be tasked with improving the youth and preparing them for public service. But Meletus seems to have it backward: almost anyone could improve the youth by interpreting the laws for them—except Socrates!

ix. To drive the point home—almost to the point of absurdity—Socrates turns to one of his favorite animal analogies: that of horses. With horses, he suggests, it's not at all the case that just anyone is capable of improving them—i.e., of making them better horses, better at racing or better at hauling carts. Rather, we have special people whose job it is to improve horses, to raise them and train them. Horse breeders, we call them.

x. Perhaps, then, humans aren't so unlike horses. There are many of us, but not all of us are capable of 'improving' others. We'd seem to be in need of a select group of human-trainers, whose job it would be to help us improve, to help us train ourselves at being 'good' humans (or perhaps 'good at being human').
xi. The text here makes it clear that Meletus is not impressed with Socrates' argument. He actively shows his "indifference." (25c) Socrates uses this against him, arguing to the jury that Meletus' indifference shows that he never really care about improving young Athenians. From his yawns we can tell that he hasn't really given the question of education and improvement much serious thought at all.

c. The Meaning of Harm
   i. From here Socrates moves on to the next prong of his interrogative attack: "Meletus, tell us also whether it is better for a man to live among good or wicked fellow citizens. […] Do not the wicked do some harm to those who are ever closest to them, whereas good people benefit them?" (25c)
   ii. Here we should pause to make a quick note about what Socrates means by the word "harm." (Here Socrates uses the phrase *kakon ergazomai*—to 'work evil' upon.) Usually, Socrates does not use such words to discuss mere violence. It's possible that there might be forms of 'violence' that don't count as 'harm,' because true harm is something that makes a person worse. So 'harm' is functioning like a technical term within our discussion of improvement versus corruption. To harm the youth would be to corrupt them—that is, to make them worse, to decrease their human excellence or arête. To improve the youth would be the opposite of harming them. It would be to make them better, to increase their human excellence (by whatever variety of means).
   iii. So: would anyone want to live amongst people who do harm to them? Who make them worse? No, replies Meletus. Not at all.
   iv. But now Socrates has Meletus where he wants him. Meletus thinks that Socrates willingly does harm to the people around him. But, says Socrates, "if I make one of my associates wicked I run the risk of being harmed by him." (25e) Yet that would make no sense. As Meletus has just admitted, no one willingly puts themselves in a situation where they're more likely to be harmed. So it would make no sense for Socrates to corrupt all the young people around him, since they would end up corrupting him in turn. Harm begets harm.

v. Another possibility remains: perhaps Socrates corrupts and harms the youth unwillingly. He does it because he think it will help him and them, but then he turns out to be wrong. As Socrates puts it: "Either I do not corrupt the young or, if I do, it is unwillingly, and you are lying in either case." (26a)
vi. If Socrates is simply mistaken, then, and he winds up corrupting the youth unwillingly, then his fault lies in ignorant. He has committed he know crime. He just doesn't really know what he's doing. The solution, then, would not be punishment, but rather education. Socrates must be taught the truth, not executed. In that case, of course, there'd be no need for all this trial business.
vii. Again: the point of all this seems to be to demonstrate to the jury that Meletus hasn't actually thought through his complaints against Socrates. If he had, he'd have uncovered this distinction between voluntary guilty and involuntary ignorance. Concludes the defendant: "Meletus has never been at all concerned with these matters." (26b)

d. Spiritual Things
i. After making those two initial arguments, apparently aimed at undermining the seriousness of Meletus' broader approach, Socrates begins to focus in on the specific accusations against him in this case. Once again, we're reminded that religion lies at the heart of the matter.
ii. As Socrates reminds us: "tell us, Meletus, how you say that I corrupt the young; or is it obvious from your deposition that it is by teaching them not to believe in the gods in whom the city believes but in other new spiritual things?" (26b)
iii. This question leads to an obvious follow-up: what are these "spiritual things" we're talking about? It's not immediately obvious what they are.
iv. To start investigating what Meletus means by his accusation, Socrates asks him to clarify his words. Does Meletus mean that Socrates is an absolute atheist—i.e., that he doesn't believe in any gods at all? Yes! Apparently, that is exactly what Meletus means. (26c)
v. Socrates seems surprised to hear how bold this accusation really is. Surely, he counters, Meletus knows that Socrates—like all other good Greeks—considers the Sun and Moon to be gods! No, replies Meletus: "for he says that the sun is stone, and the moon earth." (26d)

vi. This should remind us of the earlier accusation leveled against Socrates, well before the trial—namely, that he claimed special knowledge about nature and/or the supernatural. In this case, Meletus is arguing that Socrates uses his special knowledge of nature—of astronomy and geology and so on—to undermine the traditional myths that provide a firm foundation for Athenian culture and politics.

vii. Socrates protests. He is, in fact, not an especially wise man when it comes to nature. He's not the ancient equivalent of an empirical scientist. Meletus must have him confused with other reputed wise men, such as Anaxagoras.(26d) (Born in the early fifth century BCE, Anaxagoras was the kind of 'philosopher' or wise man who taught doctrines about the material world: e.g., that matter is indestructible though mutable; that intellect guides the motion of the universe; etc.)

viii. Here again, Socrates reminds the jury that Meletus' poorly-thought-out arguments should reflect poorly on the merits of his deposition. He constantly contradicts himself and doesn't even seem to really know who Socrates is and what he does. (27a)

ix. To show that Meletus is tied up in contradictions, Socrates then reminds us that Meletus accused him of believing in spiritual things other than the traditional gods. But, asks Socrates, can one believe in spiritual things without believing in spirits? Or: "does any man believe in spiritual activities who does not believe in spirits?" (27c)

x. To help us understand this point, Socrates points out parallels to this relationship between adjectives and nouns. That is to say: "spiritual" depends on "spirit" the way that "human" depends on "human being." You can't believe that something is "spiritual" or "human"-like unless you also believe that there are things like spirits and human persons—at least as far as Socrates is concerned.

xi. If even Meletus would agree that Socrates believes in spiritual things, then he'd also have to agree that Socrates believes in spirits (*daimones*). That means he believes in the divine, which in turns means he believes in gods. Meletus' refined claim—viz. that Socrates is an atheist who doesn't believe in any gods at all—is thus false. And it's false even on the grounds of Meletus' original accusation against Socrates. Thus Meletus has contradicted himself and—we repeat—is not serious in his arguments against Socrates.

xii. Socrates' line of argument here seems to accomplish at least two feats:
    1. It allows him to build up his reputation as religious, against the slanders of Meletus. Even if he's stopped short of proving his utter fidelity to the traditional gods of the city, he has shown that his religious beliefs are less radical than his enemies would have you believe. And he's certainly no atheist!
    2. More subtly, it allows him to continue undermining Meletus' character. The point isn't just to make a substantive claim about religion, but also to show that Meletus' arguments lack internal consistency. Followed through to their conclusions, Meletus' own claims contradict each other and so fall apart under their own weight. His case against Socrates should then fail, not only because the content of its accusations is false, but also because the form of those accusations is self-defeating.

e. The Fear of Death
    i. Having defended his "occupation"—of divinely ordained wisdom-tester—Socrates now faces an added layer of disdain. People might ask him if he's "ashamed" that he's lived his life in such a way that his own city is thinking about putting him to death. To Socrates, however, death is far from the most shameful fate to fear.
    ii. Far from worrying about whether or not his actions will bring about his own death, Socrates thinks a man "should look to this only in his actions, whether what he does is right or wrong, whether he is acting like a good or a bad man." (28b)
    iii. With this sentiment, Socrates suggests he is following in the footsteps of Achilles, the great hero from Homer's *Iliad*. He even refers explicitly to Achilles' proclamation that he'd rather die for justice than live on as a laughingstock. (28c-d) Like Achilles, Socrates is claiming fidelity to a value higher than mere death.
    iv. But why is Socrates so quick to disdain death here? Shouldn't his usual call for humility and an acceptance of human limitations lead him away from any boastful claims about how he doesn't fear death? How does he know there's nothing to fear?
    v. In fact, Socrates thinks his own claim to wisdom-in-ignorance goes hand in hand with his not being afraid of death. To fear death, he argues, would presume that we knew something about death and what comes after it. But we don't, says Socrates. No

one days. Therefore it would be overly proud—even hubristic—to fear death, since that would rest on the presumptuous claim to know death.

vi. In Socrates' eyes, he's following a divine command. Apollo has placed him at his post and tasked him with examining the apparently wise. To stop doing so out of fear of death would be akin to a soldier fleeing from his post during a battle. Socrates will not succumb to such cowardice—especially not when that cowardice would be founded on a baseless presumption to know what one does not (maybe cannot) know.

vii. As Socrates puts it: "To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know. It is perhaps on this point and in this respect, gentlemen, that I differ from the majority of men, and if I were to claim that I am wiser than anyone in anything, it would be in this, that, as I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not think I have. I do know, however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, be he god or man." (29a-b)

viii. Far from claiming special knowledge about death or the underworld, Socrates accepts his limitations, accepts that he may not know what lies beyond death as the limit of life. His claim to 'human wisdom,' such as it is, must also be an acceptance of some measure of ignorance about certain things. To be wise is, in a sense, to know how far your wisdom extends and where it stops.

ix. Still, as we can see from this quotation, that doesn't mean Socrates is swearing off any kind of knowledge whatsoever. He retains the ideal of some values—moral values, it seems—that would rise above even life and death. Good and evil, right and wrong, obedience and disobedience—these he wants to retain, even if here he hasn't given us much substance as to what is actually good, right, obedient, and so on. At the very least, we can say that Socrates defends the claim that obedience to the gods is an unquestioned good—and so he must carry on his divine mission (however annoying) until the bitter end.

f. What Matters and What Doesn't

i. Socrates further clarifies the purpose of his divine mission. In addition to revealing the ignorance lying within men of reputed wisdom, he is also meant to reveal that most people don't actually care about the high-minded values they espouse. Others may talk of virtue and excellence and so on, but all too often these are either empty words or means to a baser end, like wealth or power or even worldly honor (fame).
ii. Far from being ashamed about his philosophical lifestyle, Socrates suggests that perhaps the men of Athens (members of the jury included!) should be ashamed of their un-philosophical lifestyles: "are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?" (29e)
iii. If someone protests that they do care about this best possible soul-state, Socrates promises that he will question and examine and test him, in accordance with his Delphic commission. If the person is shown to be false, then: "I shall reproach him because he attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things." (30a)
iv. In this passage, Socrates' mission takes on a more identifiable shape. He's not just some joker, going around proving people wrong for the hell of it. He does have a deeper goal: to show people how wrong their priorities are. Their order of things is all out of whack. He may not know exactly how to set it right in an instant, but he does want people to think about how they rank their goals in life and whether they might be mistaken about that ranking. In the end, it's all about arête—although we still have to get clear on what exactly we mean when we talk about excellence…
v. In Socrates' words: "For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively." (30b)

5. Prelude to the Verdict
    a. Harm Reprise
        i. As his speech progresses, Socrates moves from addressing the complaints of Meletus and Anytus and Lycon to a more extended explanation of his own lifestyle and condition. He has just said

that his own message has to do with pushing people to think about what they mean by "excellence." When he's talking with young Athenians, he's trying to prod them to reconsider the great value they place on money and power and reputation. He wants them to think about what makes for an excellent human being, rather than a rich human being or a powerful one or a famous one.

ii. This message, in his estimation, does not corrupt the youth. It does not harm them. Recall what we learned earlier about harm: it's not simple force or violence, but any activity that makes someone worse. Since Socrates' message is meant to cause the youth to reflect on what might make them good people—rather than rich at any cost, etc.—it would seem impossible that his goal was instead to make them bad people.

iii. No, says Socrates, the real risk of harm is coming not from him, but from the men of Athens—prosecutors, jury, audience all. We might first think he means that these people are going to harm him—but he doesn't mean that at all. In fact, he says that these people can't harm him—even if they kill him! But they can harm themselves. They can harm themselves precisely by killing him. All of this will make sense to us only if we remember that, for Socrates, harming always means making someone worse.

iv. Says Socrates, boldly: "Be sure that if you kill the sort of man I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves. Neither Meletus nor Anytus can harm me in any way; he could not harm me, for I do not think it is permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse; certainly he might kill me, or perhaps banish or disenfranchise me, which he and maybe others think to be great harm, but I do not think so. I think he is doing himself much greater harm doing what he is doing now, attempting to have a man executed unjustly. Indeed, men of Athens, I am far from making a defense now on my own behalf, as might be thought, but on yours, to prevent you from wrongdoing by mistreating the god's gift to you by condemning me; for if you kill me you will not easily find another like me." (30c-d)

v. Here we can see Socrates rhetorically flipping the tables on his opponents. It is not he who is at risk of harm—they are. It is not he who needs to defend himself—they need to defend themselves. Bold indeed! He even seems to admit to his own exceptional status, something he avoided admitting earlier, such as when he said that Apollo used his name only as an example. Now

he is "god's gift"—again, not because he has the power of a god, but because he is on a divine mission to correct our own view of human wisdom.

vi. Socrates continues by characterizing this divine mission as that of a "gadfly:" (30e) an insect that stings a horse, waking it up, perhaps even disturbing it. Athens is the horse to Socrates' gadfly. He is there to bite them and sting them with his words, so that they can wake up from their slumber and begin to think about what goodness, rightness, justice, piety, and such things mean—in short, to think about what arête means.

b. The Philosopher's Lifestyle
   i. Socrates next supports his contention that he's a gift from the god by pointing to his own lifestyle as evidence. Unlike the elites of Athens and their Sophistic gurus, he doesn't live in luxury. He enjoys none of the spoils of wealth and power. As he's reiterated multiple times already: he doesn't get paid—unlike those other so-called teachers.
   ii. Instead of luxury, Socrates' life is characterized by noticeable poverty. And he calls this poverty a "witness" to the "truth" that he speaks. Poverty signifies honesty, sincerity.
   iii. In the man's own words (via Plato): "That I am the kind of person to be a gift of god to the city you might realize from the fact that it does not seem like human nature for me to have neglected all my own affairs and to have tolerated this neglect now for so many years while I was always concerned with you, approaching each one of you like a father or an elder brother to persuade you to care for virtue." (31a-b)
   iv. The direct cause of Socrates' poverty is that he spends all his time not working a job, not building up his savings, but attending to the needs of the people of Athens. And what is it they need, in his estimation? Care for virtue—for excellence, for arête. He is a father or a brother that is also a gadfly; his sting is meant to awaken the Athenians—and maybe us too—to something other than the daily grind.

c. The Philosophical and the Political
   i. Of course, here we could push back against Socrates, as it appears the jury did: if you care so much about the people, why didn't you take a more active hand in politics? If you want the city to be virtuous, why not lead the city in a virtuous way? Why not create the conditions for human excellence from above?

ii. To this question, Socrates responds in at least two ways. The first involves invoking 'spiritual things,' maybe even 'religious' things. The second involves a more practical consideration.
    1. First, the religious defense: "I have a divine or spiritual sign which Meletus has ridiculed in his deposition. This began when I was a child. It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything. This is what has prevented me from taking part in public affairs, and I think it was quite right to prevent me." (31d)
    2. We might find this to be an odd line of defense. Why is Socrates appealing to voices in his head? We should be careful that we don't import an overly modern understanding of 'mental health' into this scene, however. Most of the audience would have at least been open to the idea of divine begins intervening in human affairs, as Socrates himself is suggesting was the case with him. Of course, this still leaves Socrates open to the charge of impiety, if his listeners take him to be making an overly hubristic claim of divine favor.
    3. Even though Socrates implies he would have obeyed the divine voice no matter what, he also sees a certain logic behind that voice's command. And perhaps the same logic would have kept him out of office regardless.
    4. The logic is this: "A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time." (32a)
    5. Socrates argues that, if he had taken a more active hand in politics, his mission in the name of virtue would have angered his opponents even more so than did his mission as a private citizen. His enemies would have assassinated him long ago if he had tried to implement city-wide ordinances in support of his unconventional take on moral and intellectual interrogation.

iii. Still, that's not to say Socrates stayed out of politics altogether. He once served on the Council, which was a special governing body selected out of the larger democratic Assembly. He recalls a memorable decision in which he was involved. During a case dealing with military leaders who had neglected to rescue all survivors after a battle (due to weather), Socrates took a stand in the name of legal procedure. The majority wanted to try the

generals all at once and move on, but Socrates wanted the normal process of individual trials to prevail. This may not strike us as the most inspiring story of democratic activism, but Socrates seems to bring it up to bring us back to his point about supporting law and justice in the face of fear and even death. (32b)

iv. When the Athenian democracy was overthrown by the oligarchy for nine months, meanwhile, Socrates refused to do their unjust bidding when it came to politically motivated executions. Again, the point here is about integrity in the face of mortality: "I showed again, not in words but in action, that, if it were not rather vulgar to say so, death is something I couldn't care less about, but that my whole concern is not to do anything unjust or impious." (32d)

v. Justice and impiety, then, are what guide Socrates in his actions. This is the case in both private and public, he says. There's no need to act differently in different spheres. The order of values should stay the same. And survival is not meant to occupy the prime position in that order of values.

vi. (We could press Socrates again here, of course: if death matters so little, then why not go for broke and attain political power? Even if your virtuous platform led to your assassination, what would that matter, given how little death seems to mean to you?)

d. The Possibility of Teaching

i. After clarifying why he never seized upon the role of politician, Socrates somewhat abruptly transitions to another occupation: that of teacher. Given our image of Socrates so far, we might imagine that 'teacher' would be a good word for describing what he does. Aren't his discussions with the people of Athens meant to lead them to a higher level of intellectual and moral understanding? Isn't that a kind of pedagogy?

ii. Yet here Socrates puts it quite bluntly: "I have never been anyone's teacher." (33a) Later, once we get to the *Phaedo*, we might want to develop a more sophisticated notion of what Socrates means here. For now, it probably suffices to say that this comment is meant to decrease his culpability for the crimes of his supposed followers.

iii. Sure, he has held many discussions with many different people. He has posed many difficult questions. But he has never forced people to listen, forced people to engage with him. His goal was never to create an army of students or disciples that would go out

and spread his message or do his dirty work for him. In a very plain way, his talk was just that—talk, conversation, dialogue.

iv. Given that, how can we hold him responsible for unleashing a generation of corrupt students upon the city? As he says, "I cannot justly be held responsible for the good or bad conduct of these people, as I never promised to teach them anything and have not done so." (33b)

v. Furthermore, he adds, those people who have listened to him certainly don't think they've been corrupted. Here he begins to list a number of associates, whose names we might recognize from other dialogues—Crito, for example, and Plato himself. (33d-e) Far from wanting vengeance against Socrates for corrupting them, all of these men seem to want to help him escape from this trial and its potentially horrific outcome.

e. Final Statements before the Verdict

i. As we draw closer to the verdict, Socrates begins to sum up his speech so far. Once again, he addresses the possibility that this trial will end in his conviction and execution. Perhaps, he muses, some will expect him to fall down and beg for his life—if not for his own sake, then at least for that of his family.

ii. Here in this passage, we learn that Socrates, for all his poverty and apolitical leanings and unorthodox lifestyle choices, does indeed have a family. He has a wife and three sons. (34d) This adds an intriguing layer to the figure of Socrates. He's not an ascetic monk living in the wilderness. He may not care much for wealth, but he hasn't cut himself off from society. He served in the military when called; he took up his role in the Council; and he has kept his family together.

iii. Despite all this, Socrates remains unafraid of death, even imminent death. He is not at all ashamed to have lived his philosophical lifestyle, nor is he ashamed to leave his family behind for his convictions. On the contrary, he finds the idea that he would beg for his life to be utterly shameful. He even mocks other men who have begged for their life in the courts of law, many on account of their wives and children—"as if they were to be immortal if you did not execute them. I think these men bring shame upon the city…" (35a-b)

iv. For Socrates, the inevitability of death should give us some perspective on our own mortality. Far from fleeing death at every moment, as if survival alone were the main purpose of everything, we should accept death as a fact—a fact among facts, not

necessarily the preeminent fact. Doing so would have the benefit of freeing us from fear of the unknown and therefore freeing us to live in the name of greater goods: perhaps justice, perhaps piety, perhaps virtue…

v. To that end, Socrates exhorts the jury not to have pity on him, but to stay focused on their purpose: "to judge according to the law." (35c) Recall here his earlier statements about how the excellence of a jury lies in its ability to tell the just from the unjust. Even at this dire hour, Socrates wants the jury to pursue its own form of excellence—its arête—regardless of how that may affects his own chances at survival.

vi. For his part, Socrates takes refuge in piety. Meletus and the others have brought him to trial in large part on account his supposed "impiety." Yet, as we have heard, Socrates's entire life and mission were founded on a devotion to piety—to the mandate of a god, a mandate meant to shed light on the limits and powers of human wisdom.

vii. Even the jury's duty to judge is founded on the gods, who underwrite the sacred oaths on which the law rests. To ask them to judge unjustly would be to ask them to commit impiety. But Socrates will not do that. He will not violate the whole character of his life up until that moment: "if I convinced you by my supplication to do violence to your oath of office, I would be teaching you not to believe that there are gods, and my defense would convict me of not believing in them. This is far from being the case, gentlemen, for I do believe in them as none of my accusers do. I leave it to you and the god to judge me in the way that will be best for me and for you." (35d)

viii. With that, this portion of Socrates's defense concludes. The jury convicts him—he is guilty. Next comes sentencing. Meletus, who seems to occupy the position of chief prosecutor, asks the jury to give Socrates the death penalty.

6. After the Verdict
    a. Socrates' Reaction
        i. Even though Socrates has been found guilty, his reaction is surprisingly muted. He begins his response to the verdict by telling us he's not angry. In fact, he thought the final vote would be closer than it actually was. He lost by about thirty votes; he thought he'd lose by more! (36a)
        ii. Furthermore, despite the fact that the jury has found him guilty, Socrates thinks that he's in some sense been acquitted: "I think

myself that I have been cleared of Meletus' charges," he remarks. (36b) Here he seems to suggest that being found guilty in the court of law doesn't necessarily mean you are guilty. Even if his apology—his speech in his own defense—didn't actually convince a majority of the jury, it did succeed in proving that Socrates is in no way impious. This is the impression Socrates himself is left with, at least.

iii. Still, the fact that remains that Meletus, making use of Anytus and Lycon and their supports within the jury, has won his case. And he has recommended that Socrates receive the death penalty for his supposed crimes. Once again, Socrates is not especially flustered by this. We've already seen that he doesn't demonstrate much fear in the face of death, and this is a theme he'll return to in his closing remarks.

b. Socrates' Sentencing Request
   i. It remains for Socrates to give his own counter-proposal for what his sentence should be. He begins by remarking that, as many in the audience would agree, he should 'get what he deserves.' And what he deserves will be based on what he has done to the people of Athens. So Socrates begins to reflect on what it is he did to or for his fellow Athenians.
   ii. Neglecting his own household and political life, he spent his time fulfilling his divine mission of interpersonal interrogation: "I went to each of you privately and conferred upon him what I say is the greatest benefit, by trying to persuade him not to care for any of his belongings before caring that he himself should be as good and as wise as possible, not to care for the city's possessions more than for the city itself…" (36c)
   iii. Far from injuring the people of Athens, then, Socrates thinks he has benefitted them greatly—or, at least, tried to do so. He aimed to benefit them by asking them to reflect on what their priorities were, what they really care about. Did they care about their property? Or did they care about what kind of people they were? Did they care about how their city fared against other rival cities? Or did they strive to make their city a better place? To the degree that Socrates was successful in prodding people to reflect on such questions, he was 'guilty' only of benefitting them, not injuring them or harming them.
   iv. In short, he was trying to make his fellow citizens "happy." (36e) But unlike, say, an Olympic athlete who seems to make people happy by accomplishing great feats on the track or in the field,

Socrates actually wanted to make people happy based on their own qualities as people.

v. Because of this benevolent mission, Socrates jokes that he should be feted like those athletes. For his own sentence, he recommends that he be given free meals in the public hall for life! (36e)
vi. Obviously, this request would be greeted as utterly arrogant and offensive by most members of the jury. Immediately, Socrates protests that he's not being arrogant. He's being as sincere as can be. He honestly believes he has only ever helped others—"I am convinced that I never willingly wrong anyone, but I am not convincing you of this" (37a)—and so what he deserves can only be help in turn. Since he's poor, free food would certainly count as help.
vii. Moving on from the free-food suggestion, Socrates then considers a prison term and a sentence of exile. In the first case, his arguments runs like this: since he has never willingly gone about wronging anyone, why would he wrong himself by sentencing himself to an unjust prison term? Injustice is injustice, whether it's aimed at oneself or another. (37b-c)
viii. As for exile: if his own brethren, the Athenians, won't accept him and his divine message, why would any other city accept him? The other Greek-speakers would tire of him just as quickly, says Socrates. Wherever he goes, the youth will be interested in his questions and the powers that be will run him down. (37d)
ix. Of course, exile wouldn't be so dangerous if Socrates could simply refrain from spouting off his usual message. If he could just keep quiet, he'd be safe. But—and this should not surprise us by now—Socrates would never accept such a gag order. To keep silent in that way would be to violate the god's command and commission. (37e-38a)
x. Furthermore, regardless of the divine origin of his mission, Socrates actually believes that his interrogations and dialogues lead to the improvement and betterment of those to whom he speaks. As he puts it to the jury quite memorably: "if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men, you will believe me even less." (38a)
xi. The unexamined life is not worth living—it's quite a claim! A life worth living, then, would have to be an examined life—that is, a tested life, a questioned life, an interrogated life. A life lived

through dialogue and discussion about virtue, about what it means to pursue human excellence (arête). To avoid such examination may be more comfortable, may even be safer, but—for Socrates, at least—it could only leave us blind to the question of what really matters. Chasing wealth and power and honor, without every stopping to ask why, would not constitute the most worthwhile kind of life for us.

xii. After dropping this rhetorical bombshell on his listeners, Socrates concludes with some rather lighthearted remarks regarding his sentencing. Prison and exile are out, obviously. Free food would be just, but perhaps unlikely. For his part, Socrates is willing to throw about one mina (100 drachma) at the authorities to make this go away. That's all he has. After Plato and Crito and some others step up and offer to help pay the fine, the final offer is 30 minas. The jury is, at last, left with its choice between two sentences: 30 minas or death. (38b)

c. The Sentence Is Passed

i. Faced with this choice between a moderate fine and the death penalty, the jury decides on death. Just as he did upon hearing the verdict, here again Socrates takes the announcement in stride. He doesn't fall down to the ground in despair. But that's not to say he's terribly impressed with the jury's decision.

ii. Right away, he points out that Athens is injuring its own reputation by killing him. All the other Greek cities, at least, will look at this and judge Athens harshly for killing the "wise man" Socrates. Of course, Socrates doesn't think himself wise in the way that other people do—but he admits that his reputation as wise will still work against Athens in this case. (38c)

iii. Socrates next points out that he wasn't convicted because he lacked the right words to say. He's happy with his defense. No, he was convicted because he refused to buckle and beg for his life. Fear of death holds no sway over him, and so he would never shame himself by pleading to the people of Athens to stay his execution.

iv. As he says: "I would much rather die after this kind of defense than live after making that other kind. Neither I nor any other man should, on trial or in war, contrive to avoid death at any cost." (38e) Like a soldier manning his post, Socrates will keep philosophizing until the bitter end. And he wouldn't have it any other way.

v. Instead of fearing death, Socrates warns his listeners that they should fear becoming evil, bad, wicked. There are fates worth than death, he implies: "It is not difficult to avoid death, gentlemen; it is much more difficult to avoid wickedness, for it runs faster than death." (39b)
vi. There is even a kind of *amor fati*—love of fate—in Socrates' remarks here: "This perhaps had to happen, and I think it is as it should be." (39b) There is no tinge of regret here, no idea that he could have or should have said anything different in his own defense. He may have been convicted in the court of law, but his opponents stand convicted in the court of truth.
vii. Socrates ends this concluding part of his speech to the entire jury with a prophecy. As he says, those closest to death are most likely to prophesy! His prediction is this: his enemies think they're ridding themselves of the worst harm, but they're actually calling down an intensive variety of vengeance upon themselves. Socrates will not be the last interrogator, examiner, or philosopher. More will come after him. And they will not blush at holding Socrates' enemies to account for their lives, their crimes and failings. (39c)
viii. The basic mistake made by Socrates' prosecutors, it turns out, was this: they sought to avoid having their own lives examined by Socrates or someone like him. Because of that, they spent all their time and energy bringing him down, so that they wouldn't have to think about their own inconsistencies and self-contradictions. But that's a waste of a life. If an unexamined life is not worth living, then to spend your life avoiding any kind of examination must be even more worthless.
ix. Hence we have Socrates' parting advice for his opponents: "To escape such tests is neither possible nor good, but it is best and easiest not to discredit others but to prepare oneself to be as good as possible." (39d) In other words: work on yourself rather than working to silence those who ask you troubling questions.

d. Final Remarks to the True Jurymen
   i. After making these closing remarks to the jury as a whole, Socrates finds time to address those members of the jury who voted to acquit rather than execute him. For these men—whom Socrates thinks to be truly just and therefore jurymen in the proper sense—he has a special, deeper message.
      1. We might even—but we don't have to—go so far as to say that he has the beginnings of an 'esoteric' teaching for

them, a teaching which will be expanded upon after the trial, as suggested by the *Phaedo*.

ii. Here he returns to that possible love of fate we just encountered. Even though his supporters treat his conviction and sentencing as the worst possible combination of events to befall him, Socrates is not so crestfallen. In fact, he thinks that the trial played out exactly as it was supposed to.

iii. How can he be so sure about this? Well, for one thing, his divine sign—his "prophetic power" or "spiritual manifestation" (40a) which we also encountered earlier—didn't warn him off from his strategy in the trial. It didn't stop him from delivering the at-times-incendiary speech in his own defense which he actually gave.

iv. We've already seen Socrates mock the fear of death on numerous occasions. But here he goes even further. He takes the sanction of his divine sign to signal that, far from being something to fear, death is something to be welcome. Death might even be… good.

v. As he proposes to his followers: "What has happened to me may well be a good thing, and those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken. I have convincing proof of this, for it is impossible that my familiar sign did not oppose me if I was not about to do what is right." (40b-c)

vi. And further: "there is good hope that death is a blessing, for it is one of two things: either the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, or it is, as we are told, a change and a relocating for the soul from here to another place." (40c)

vii. So there are two 'good' possibilities for explaining what death is:
    1. Death is a dreamless sleep—and therefore more pleasant than most of our waking hours and days. (40d-e)
    2. In death, our immortal souls pass over to Hades, where we are judged according to the goodness (or badness) of our lives, and where we also get to converse with the heroes of the past. (41a-b)

viii. Socrates seems especially taken by the possibility that death sees the soul cross over into an afterlife populated by other souls. There it will never die again, but instead will get the chance to keep on examining all the other souls, especially the best souls, hopefully getting closer and closer to some kind of wisdom about human virtue and excellence. (41c)

ix. Here we can see Socrates espousing something like a 'heaven,' although he is less interested in the beatific vision or everlasting

bliss than he is in a kind of better version of this life. Always remember that his dream is not to enter into pure virtue, but instead to keep questioning others as to what they mean by virtue—forever and ever.

x. Socrates wants his friends to avoid all fear of death—that much we can glean by now. Beyond that, he offers them what seems like a central truth of his teaching: "that a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death, and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods." (41c-d)

xi. We should understand this passage in terms of what Socrates understands by 'harm.' A truly good man aims to make both himself and others good. As long as he orients himself in that way, then he will not be able to be 'made worse'—to be made evil. He may be killed—like Socrates—but he won't be made to be evil. To keep this truth in mind—along with what seems like a sincere reverence for the gods—is to maintain the ideal of piety. And, as Socrates has said, he wants his listeners to understand that he has never fallen into impiety, despite the misinformed ramblings of Meletus and the rest.

xii. As an almost-final aside, Socrates asks his supporters to think of his sons. But he doesn't want them to give his sons money or power. He doesn't want them to coddle his sons or build up their egos. Instead, he wants his supports to keep questioning his own sons—Socratically, just as he questioned the youth of Athens. That is the greatest gift he can leave to his children. (41e)

xiii. At long last, we come to Socrates' parting words in the *Apology*: "Now the hour to part has come. I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god." (42a)

xiv. Here again we recognize the familiar beats of Socrates' defense. He no longer fears death. To fear death would be to hubristically claim to know death. Given his little bit of human wisdom, Socrates at least knows when he doesn't know the truth of the matter. Death is beyond his ken, at least for now. And so there's nothing to fear. Nor is there any way to judge life against death. He leaves the question of their relative valuation to the judgment of a higher authority—to the judgment of a god. In doing so, he ensures that—whatever we think of his own brand of human wisdom—we would be hard pressed to doubt his piety.