

Study Guide on Plato's *Apology*

Coming from Greek, *apologia* originally means “a speech in one’s own defense.” Does Socrates make a suitable “apology” in this dialogue?

- What exactly are the charges? Consider both the earlier (19b–c¹) and later (24b–c) charges. Is Socrates guilty of any of the charges leveled against him?
- Does he answer the charges adequately?
- How does he answer the charges of Meletus in particular? Does he do so sufficiently?

Why does Socrates die? Evaluate how and to what degree different parties bear responsibility, including the jury, the people of Athens, and Socrates (in his life and in the defense he gives).

What kind of oratory is Socrates practicing (17a ff.)?

- Is Socrates’ apology the “true oratory” mentioned in the *Gorgias* (517a)?
 - There Socrates speaks about “getting the souls of the citizens to be as good as possible” and also “striving valiantly to say what is best, whether the audience will find it more pleasant or more unpleasant” (503a).
 - He also says that a “person who is to be an orator in the right way should be just and be knowledgeable in what is just” (508c).
- Should not true oratory try to make the just position seem as plausible as possible?

Why does Socrates bring up the earlier accusations against him?

- Socrates insists on making his case “from the beginning” (19a).
- Socrates explains that his “accusers are of two kinds . . .” (18d). Do the later accusations rely on the earlier ones? Are they in any way *caused* by the earlier ones?

¹ John M. Cooper, editor. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997. (All references in parentheses are to the standard Stephanus pagination for Plato’s dialogues.)



- The first accusations: “Socrates is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse into the stronger argument, and he teaches the same things to others” (19b–c). After listing these, Socrates claims, “Not one of them is true” (19d).
- The later accusations: “Socrates is guilty of corrupting the youth and of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things . . .” (24b–c).

Does Socrates want to die? Does it seem that Socrates could have convinced the jury that he was not guilty if he had sincerely tried to do so? Could he have done that without compromising on his principles?

- Does he give the best possible account of his actions and life?
- Does it seem that Socrates is principally interested in defending himself against the charges?
 - “Indeed, gentlemen of the jury, 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 . . .” (30d–e).
 - “I do not think it right to supplicate the jury and to be acquitted because of this [‘pitiful dramatics in court’], but to teach and persuade them” (35c).

What is Socrates trying to do for or to the jury? Does he try to annoy them? (See 30d–e and 35e ff.) Is he still acting like a gadfly? Does he want to force them to examine themselves? Give an account of Socrates’ motivations for acting as he does towards the jury.

Consider the latter part of the dialogue (35e ff.). Why does Socrates claim that being fed in the Prytaneum is the only “punishment” consistent with his teachings? Does he make a strong case? Do you think Socrates deserves such an honor?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Plato’s *Apology*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

