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Socrates' Rhetorical Strategy
in Plato's *Apology*

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Abstract

This paper investigates Socrates' intention in his defense speech against the first accusers in Plato's *Apology*. As a defender, Socrates is supposed to argue for his acquittal. However, his opening defense against the first accusations that he engages in natural philosophy and rhetoric does not seem to aid him in this respect. To the official and later indictment for corrupting the young and disbelieving in the gods, Socrates adds further accusations, which the accusers themselves never brought up. For what purpose does Socrates seemingly incriminate himself and, through this unorthodox tactic, what does he achieve?

Previous studies on this question generally offer two interpretations. Some suggest that Socrates' argument against the first accusations, which he himself raises, is a reasonable appeal for an acquittal, because the official indictment depends on the claim of the first accusations. Others contend that Socrates does not attempt to argue for his acquittal, but merely highlights the tragic and irresolvable conflict between his own sense of morality and the conventional ethics of the city. This paper offers a third interpretation. Appealing to the first accusations as an example of the prejudice that he considers characteristic of the Athenians, Socrates tries to transform the negative connotations attached to their prejudice into positive associations, without sufficiently refuting the accusations. His speech is less a refutation than it is an attempt to elevate his moral status in the eyes of the public.

Keywords: Plato, Socrates, *Apology*

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Introduction

This paper investigates the rhetorical strategy Socrates employs in his defense speech against what he calls the first accusations in Plato's *Apology of Socrates* (18a7-24b2). It argues that Socrates does not so much attempt to defend his life by refuting the accusers as to protect his public image by skillfully giving a new meaning to the popular prejudice against him.

As a defender, naturally, he is expected to argue for his acquittal in a straightforward and effective way. But his opening defense against the first accusations that he engages in natural philosophy and rhetoric does not seem to aid him in this respect. Socrates temporarily puts aside the official indictment for corrupting the young and disbelieving in the gods of the city, which demands the capital punishment, and, to it, adds further accusations, which the official accusers themselves never brought up. For what rhetorical purpose does Socrates seemingly incriminate himself and, through this unorthodox tactic, what does he intend to achieve?

Previous studies on this question generally offer two interpretations. Some suggest that Socrates' argument against the first accusations is a reasonable appeal for an acquittal, because the official indictment is based on the first accusations and Socrates' response is effective in refuting them.¹ Others contend that Socrates does not attempt to argue for his acquittal, but merely highlights the tragic and insoluble conflict between his own sense of morality and the conventional ethics of the city.² This paper offers a third interpretation. Appealing to the first accusations as an example of the prejudice that he considers characteristic of the Athenians, particularly in their regard for philosophers, Socrates tries to transform the negative connotations attached to their prejudice into positive associations, without sufficiently refuting the accusations or even the prejudice itself. His speech is less a matter of refutation than it is an attempt to elevate his moral status in the eyes of the public.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first section deals with Socrates' account of the first accusations and his counter argument (18a7-20c3). Among the slanders against him, he emphasizes that he has been called "wise" and gives what his accusers intended to be a castigation a new and positive meaning. Second, the paper analyzes the connection between this initial argument and the story of the Delphic oracle, which Socrates later recounts (20c4-23c1). Through this story, Socrates depicts himself as possessing great wisdom—a human virtue confirmed by the god at Delphi. The third section examines the final part of Socrates' speech on the first accusations in which he identifies the origin of the official indictment (23c2-24b2). Here Socrates ties together the official and unofficial indictments by rooting both of them in his actual possession of wisdom. His peculiar way of connecting the indictments reveals his strategy to protect his reputation concerning human virtue, especially wisdom.

¹See, for example, Brickhouse and Smith, pp. 37-47; Reeve, p. xiii.

²See Colaïaco, pp. 1-11.

The First Accusations and the Meaning of “Wise Man”

At the beginning of his defense speech, Socrates surprisingly does not turn immediately to the official accusations, but adds new ones, which he calls the first accusations, and begins his defense here. This strategy seems to make his task more difficult: he has to deal with the official and added accusations in a short time (18d7-19a7).¹ Believing that it would be very difficult to remove the slander in a short amount time (18e5-19a7, 24a1-4), it seemingly would have made more sense for him to avoid presenting a negative image of himself to the jury. For what purpose and in what way does Socrates seemingly incriminate himself when his own life is at stake?

Socrates introduces the first accusations (18a7-19a7) and proceeds to argue against them by reframing them as a formal charge (19a8-20c3). His introduction of the first accusations reveals that these accusations actually contain some veiled praise for Socrates as a wise man, and that he does not intend to refute them entirely. Socrates is able to elevate himself by emphasizing the positive meaning of “wise man.”

Socrates accounts for the first accusations as follows:

[T]here is a certain Socrates, a wise man (σοφὸς ἀνὴρ), a thinker of the things aloft, and one who has investigated all things under the earth and who makes the weaker speech the stronger.² (18b6-c1)

Socrates has been accused of engaging in natural philosophy and rhetoric. Investigators of natural philosophy explain things by referring to rational causes, denying the commonly worshipped deities that are the moral basis of the community. Therefore, upon hearing this particular rumor (φήμη), people in Athens would be inclined to think that Socrates does not believe in the gods. At the time of Socrates’ trial, this rumor had taken deep root among the people, not only because the numerous first accusers had influenced people for many years, but also because the accusations were originally made in the absence of Socrates or anyone else who might have defended him.

However, the rumor contains hidden praise for Socrates in calling him “a wise man.” Though the connotations are intended to be pejorative, we do not actually know to what extent the original propagators of the rumor truly had a negative opinion of Socrates.³ The negative connotations of the rumor arise only from the inference drawn by whoever hears it. The foundation of the original accusation is that Socrates is a wise man and the other accusations derive from this, which could be interpreted as a high evaluation. For this reason, Socrates does not attempt to refute the slander. At the end of the *Prosthesis*, he expresses his hope for the outcome of his speech:

¹Leibowitz, p. 39.

²All quotations from Plato’s *Apology* are my own translation from John Burnet’s edition of OCT. I also refer to the translations by West and Kremer.

³Leibowitz, p. 40.

I would wish that it might happen in this way [removing the slander], *if it is better for you and me*, and that I may accomplish something by making a defense. (19a2-4, emphasis added)

His desire to remove the slander is conditional.¹ Since the first accusations contain a seed of praise, it is conceivable that it might be better for Socrates and for the people if he does not remove the slander.

At this point, Socrates' attitude toward the accusations is still ambiguous. But he has already turned the situation to his advantage by assuming the description of the first accusers under his control.² Just as he was accused in the absence of any defenders, now he criticizes his accusers without having to face their direct counter-argument. Fighting against shadows is not always a disadvantage for the fighter. What then does he accomplish by dealing with his opponents in this way?

Taking up the slander again "from the beginning" (ἐξ ἀρχῆς), he transforms it into a formal accusation. In the defense that follows, he changes the meaning of the rumor that he is a "wise man." Whereas the original accusation name this as cause for suspicion, suggesting that Socrates engages in natural philosophy and rhetoric, Socrates shapes the accusation such that "wise man" comes to have a positive meaning. Thus, without straightforwardly refuting the accusation, Socrates gradually changes its connotations and thereby shapes the popular view of his character.

There are some significant changes in Socrates' official rendering of the first accusations. The official version reads:

Socrates does injustice and is meddling, by investigating the things under the earth and in heaven, and by making the weaker speech the stronger, and by teaching others these same things. (19b4-c1)

Although Thomas Brickhouse & Nicholas Smith regard the formalized version of the accusation as "(only very) slightly different from" the previous one, the changes in the wording are important.³ First, the phrase "a wise man" disappears and "does injustice and is meddling" takes its place. Second, the charge of "teaching others these same things" is added. On the one hand, these changes may be appropriate to a formal indictment, since the first change gives it a stronger tone of reproach and the second may be necessary because accusing someone of teaching is more conspicuous than thinking. But Socrates' revisions to the charge are also advantageous to his cause. He omits the slander that he is a wise man from the formalized accusation; thus he may be still wise even after his refutation. Also, as David Leibowitz points out,

¹West, p. 83; Strauss, p. 39; Leibowitz, pp. 47-48. Brickhouse & Smith omit "if" here. Based on this omission, they argue that Socrates attempts mainly to succeed in his defense, i.e., to be acquitted by refuting all charges, official and unofficial. Brickhouse & Smith, pp. 37-47, 60-61.

²Strauss, p. 39; Bruell, p. 143.

³Brickhouse & Smith, p. 63.

Socrates avoids the inference of atheism in the formalized charge.¹ Thus, by reframing the first accusations, Socrates selects which charges should be refuted and which topics should not even be mentioned.

These changes contribute to improving Socrates' image as a wise man. Socrates does not deny the investigation of natural philosophy, but he claims that having knowledge about it is praiseworthy. The formalized charge is depicted in the comedy of Aristophanes, in which Socrates is carried around investigating natural things and teaching immoral rhetoric.² Plato's Socrates, however, only denies that he "understands" (ἐπαίειν) natural phenomena and rhetoric or shares the knowledge,³ even though the charge is about investigating or practicing, not about having knowledge of such things. Without dispelling the suspicion, Socrates subtly elevates the honorability of possessing such knowledge.

I am not saying this to dishonor this kind of knowledge, if anyone is wise in such things. (19c5-7)

Socrates appears to claim that he is innocent of having knowledge of natural phenomena and rhetoric, but that this lacking is regrettable, as Leibowitz points out.⁴ Even while seemingly absolving himself of the charge, Socrates shifts the estimation of knowledge and wisdom to one that is praiseworthy (18c2-3). Now we can understand why Socrates does not include being "a wise man" in the formalized charge and avoids the potential inferences of atheism: If he cannot quash the rumor against him, he can at least reshape the image connected with it. He replaces the common opinion regarding knowledge and wisdom with a new and favorable one, explicitly avoiding the unfavorable association with atheism that is sometimes attached to philosophy. Though the charge concerns the investigation of natural philosophy and practice of rhetoric, Socrates answers that having knowledge or being wise should be regarded as a good thing, whether or not he is actually guilty of having it.⁵

Furthermore, through dealing with the charge of teaching others, Socrates adds the topic of virtue to the discussion. He does not directly deny having taught others. Rather, at first, he merely denies that he ever received money for teaching, like the sophists do (19d8-20a2). The focus of the charge is shifting; making money for teaching does not even appear in the original and formalized indictments. The story of Socrates' conversation with Callias, which Socrates himself recounts, shows this shift more clearly. One day, Socrates asked Callias about the education of Callias' two sons (20a6-b9): "Who is a knower of such virtue, that of human being and citizen" (20b4-5), and who makes them noble and good? Callias answers, "Evenus ... from Paros, for five minae"

¹Leibowitz, p. 40.

²*Clouds* 1321-1453.

³Cf. West, p. 92; Bruell, p. 145.

⁴Leibowitz, p. 59.

⁵Cf. West, pp. 92, 96.

(20b6). But this is not a mere divergence to the subject of being paid for teaching or not. Here Socrates deliberately introduces the notion of teaching *human virtue*, which appears in neither the original nor formalized accusations. Therefore, when Socrates faces the charge of teaching, he does not deny teaching natural philosophy or rhetoric, but teaching virtue (20b9-c3). Teaching for money and the art of the sophists, then, function as a bridge to connect the two different topics: natural philosophy and rhetoric, which appear in the accusation, and human virtue, which does not. Since virtue is commonly more praiseworthy and less suspicious than natural philosophy, Socrates denies, with an air of regret, that he has the art of teaching but does so in such a way as to venerate it.¹ Thus the speech that began with the slander that Socrates teaches others natural philosophy and rhetoric ends with praise for the art of teaching virtue by way of a denial that Socrates possesses this art. Yet, Socrates' denial is deliberately insufficient. Not receiving money for teaching is clearly not sufficient evidence for not teaching at all.

Thus, instead of defending himself directly against the charge, Socrates tries to affect the meaning of the slander by changing the wording and shifting the focus so that even if he is guilty of the charge, it no longer means that he is a wise man in the negative sense of the term—disbelieving in the gods, acquiring knowledge of natural things, and exercising rhetoric—but that he is a wise man in the sense of having great knowledge and being a teacher of virtue. Thus the accusation may be true, but the nature of the accusation is altered and the popular hostility against wisdom mitigated.

The Delphic Oracle and Socrates' Demonstration of his own Wisdom

Thus far, Socrates has transformed the meaning of “wise man” so that it is favorable, but he has also modestly denied actually possessing wisdom. Socrates now offers proof of his wisdom by summoning a surprising witness: the Delphic oracle.

In order to turn the topic from the first accusations to the story of the oracle, Socrates employs the retort of a hypothetical respondent, represented by “some of you” (τις ὑμῶν), to highlight the insufficiency of his own argument. This litigator would request that Socrates clarify what it is that he has actually done, since it is unlikely such a rumor would arise if he had done nothing worthy of note. The hypothetical respondent not only presupposes that Socrates has defended himself successfully (he has made it seem as though there is no ground for the slander), he is also careful not to judge too hastily (20c4-d1). In other words, the fictional representative of the audience is favorably predisposed toward Socrates. Taking advantage of the opportunity he thus provides, Socrates commences the complex process of identifying the origin of “the name” (ὄνομα) he has gained as one who is wise. Socrates wishes to illustrate that the true origin of this rumor is his actual possession of wisdom, or more precisely “human wisdom” (ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία), which is different

¹Compare 19c2-8 with 20b5-c3.

from the sophists' alleged wisdom concerning virtue. After the mitigation of the negative image concerning wisdom, the negative connotation of "wise man" in the original accusation is overridden.¹ Based on this condition, Socrates' use of a hypothetical respondent gives him the chance to prove his own wisdom.

To this end, Socrates offers a most reliable witness: the god at Delphi. According to Socrates, it was his comrade Chaerephon who audaciously asked the oracle whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. As Socrates recounts it, "The Pythia answered that no one was wiser" (21a6-7).

Socrates then establishes his own wisdom by interpreting the oracle. His first reaction to the oracle is not a sense of honor or acceptance, but of wonder: "Whatever is the god saying, and what riddle is he posing?" (21b3-4). The cause of his wonder is his confidence that he is not wise. At first, the god and Socrates are in conflict, because Socrates tacitly refuses to withdraw his opinion about himself before the divine authority. This conflict would be strengthened by his boastful interpretation of the oracle: the god claims that Socrates is "the wisest" (σοφώτατον, 21b5-6).²

Socrates then reports that, in order to investigate the meaning of the oracle, he conversed with three kinds of reputedly wise men: politicians, poets, and manual artisans. The results were the same in all cases. As Socrates examined them, they seemed wise to themselves and to others, but not to Socrates. Socrates realizes that neither he nor they know anything about "the noble and good" (κάλὸν καγαθόν, 21d4) or "the greatest things" (τὰ μέγιστα, 22d7), but they suppose that they know even though they do not know, and Socrates does not suppose that he knows because he does not know. Only in this way is Socrates wiser.

Although the examination of the three reputable men supports the oracle's assessment, it is Socrates' own interpretation that determines the meaning of the wisdom the oracle confers on Socrates. For it is Socrates' own judgment that to be wiser than others means to be wisest with respect to the noble and good or to the greatest things. We do not know how and when Socrates confirms his own judgment about the field of wisdom. In the process of investigating the meaning of the oracle, he never conversed with natural philosophers and sophists. He presupposes that the oracle refers to human virtue (cf. 29d2-30b4), and here demonstrates that he, Socrates, is wisest concerning human virtue.

Accordingly, the focus of the slander against Socrates as a wise man is on his wisdom concerning human virtue. Socrates came to be called "wise," because people supposed him to be wise with respect to the things concerning which he refuted others (23a3-5). Originally, the slander against him concerned natural philosophy, rhetoric, and atheism. But Socrates disputes the slander with respect to human virtue instead, never mentioning natural philosophy or the art of rhetoric during the story of the oracle.

¹Compare 20d9-e3 with 18b6-c3; cf. 19c1-4, 19e1-4, 20b9-c3.

²The oracle may also mean that Socrates and all human beings are equally wise or unwise. Cf. Colaiaco, pp. 58, 70-71; Leibowitz, pp. 64-65, 80.

Socrates denies that he is wise in the sense that he has knowledge. He claims that the oracle deems human wisdom worthless. Therefore, anyone who realizes the limitation of human wisdom will be the wisest among human beings. Having reached this interpretation, Socrates reveals the true picture of himself. He is not wise in the sense that he has complete knowledge about virtue as the slander says, but he is the wisest among human beings solely because of his awareness of his own ignorance as the oracle says. Therefore, either by reputation or in truth, he is a wise man.

The story of the oracle thus affirms Socrates' status as a wise man and revises the connotations of the original accusation against him.

Socrates' Young Followers as a Source of the Slander and his Defense of his own Reputation

Thus far, Socrates' account of the oracle has only addressed Socrates' human wisdom concerning human virtue, without replying to the charges against him of practicing natural philosophy and rhetoric, which are associated with atheism. Aware of the inadequacy of his account, Socrates goes on to reveal the source of the slander against him, an explanation that will bolster his account of the oracle.

The direct source of the slander is the young men whom Socrates has taught and who, being from rich families, have leisure to stir up trouble. They enjoyed hearing people refuted by Socrates and imitated his style of examination. Those refuted by those young men were angry with Socrates and claimed that he corrupted his young followers. Since the offended parties did not have any idea of Socrates' true activity or teaching, they ascribe to him some of the common slanders used against all philosophers: "investigating the things aloft and the things under the earth," "not believing in gods," and "making the weaker speech the stronger" (23d6-7). The slander prompted by the activity of the young imitators explains the first accusations much more convincingly than the oracle in terms of contents and seriousness.

Socrates connects these additional slanders with the later, formal accusations. Socrates' own accusers are vexed on behalf of the elders who were refuted by Socrates' young followers: Meletus attacks him on behalf of the poets, Anytus the craftsmen and politicians, and Lycon the orators. Socrates' examination of the oracle, then, has produced both accusations, the first, which he brings up himself, and the later, formal charges. The argument against the first accusations is thus made tantamount to the argument against the later ones. Since his wisdom is only human wisdom, as the god affirms, all the charges and slander about his intellectual activity should be false.

However, his argument thus far is not a clear refutation. He does not prove by word or by evidence that he never engaged in natural philosophy and rhetoric, nor that he believes in the orthodox gods of his fellow citizens.¹

¹Burnyeat, p. 152. In the *Phaedo* (95e7-99d2), Socrates confesses that he has engaged in natural philosophy. Cf. West, p. 105; Leibowitz, p. 64.

Instead, he has discussed the “origin” of the slanders (the oracle and the youth). At least, one might object, Socrates should have proven that he does not belong to the category of “all philosophers” who are said to engage in suspicious activity. But Socrates does not even claim that the rumor against them is false.

Instead of refuting the first accusations, Socrates has endeavored to prove his status as a wise man. As discussed above, he first shifts the topic from natural philosophy and rhetoric to the veneration of wisdom concerning virtue. Second, taking advantage of the retort by a hypothetical litigator, Socrates identifies the origin of his reputation for wisdom by introducing the story of the oracle and shows himself to be the wisest concerning human virtue. Third, by discussing his influence on the young, Socrates provides a more persuasive account of how he came to be slandered as a wise man and, simultaneously, he connects the first and second allegations: Now Socrates’ possession of human wisdom penetrates all the accusations as their true origin. That is, Socrates is accused of being wise because he is wise. Accordingly, he omits “a wise man” from the list of the slander against him in the end (23d2-7; cf. 18b4-c3).

The thesis that Socrates’ defense speech was his attempt to demonstrate his wisdom without sufficiently proving his innocence may receive objections.¹ For instance, later in his speech, Socrates seems to forbid people from seeking reputation.

[A]re you not ashamed that you care for having as much money as possible, as well as reputation and honor, but you neither care for nor reflect prudence, truth, or the betterment of your soul? (29d8-e3)

From this strong reproach, it may be surmised that the true philosopher will value truth and the goodness of the soul without caring for secular things at all. But Socrates does not forbid seeking fame as such, only the pursuit of fame and money that shows no regard for truth and the soul. Indeed, as Brickhouse & Smith suggest, the wording here leaves room for the possibility that a truth-seeker may also seek fame in some way on some occasion.² Actually Socrates’ himself intends to protect his own fame.

[As] to reputation, for me, you and the entire city, to me it does not seem to be noble for me to do any of these things [begging the audience for mercy], for I am old and have this name, whether it is true or false: it is reputed at least that Socrates excels most human beings in some way. (34e2-35a1)

Brickhouse & Smith argue that Socrates regards the false slander as praise.³ While this is true, his statement is more radical. Socrates contends that the slander should be kept intact even if it is false, for the reputation that stems from these accusations is favorable to Socrates. Socrates has used his defense

¹Colaiaco, pp. 144-145.

²Brickhouse & Smith, pp. 164-165; Kondo, p. 46; cf. 30a7-b4

³Brickhouse & Smith, p. 203, n. 64.

speech to indicate the reputation that people are supposed to perceive. People must believe that Socrates is wise concerning human virtue. To remove this reputation would not be advantageous for Socrates or for the public (cf. 19a2-4).

Through identifying the origin of the rumor that Socrates is a wise man, Socrates has rooted all the indictments against him in his own actual wisdom. Therefore, whether the slander against him is true or not, it is not beneficial for him to remove it, and indeed, he never intended to do so.

Conclusion

In his argument against the first accusations, Socrates elevates his image as a wise man by skillfully changing the meaning of the slander against him. It is not a sufficient refutation of his indictment, as Brickhouse & Smith argue, because Socrates' defense does not even directly address the charges. Neither is it an expression of moral discord between Socrates and the Athenians as James Colaiaco would have it, since Socrates makes people believe that he is morally distinguished from *their* perspective, not his own.

His treatment of the first accusers thus promotes his popular image as a philosopher. This would not be a good strategy if he intended only to be acquitted. Instead, his speech serves to mitigate the popular hostility against him and, effectively, philosophers who succeed him. Socrates knows that it would be almost impossible to convince the jury of his innocence or to rebut the slander against him in the short amount of time given to him (18e5-19a7, 24a1-4). Within this limitation, Socrates puts protecting his own reputation and securing the future of philosophy in the city before preserving his own life.¹

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¹Cf. Xenophon, *Apology of Socrates to the Jury* 9. Leibowitz argues that Socrates discreetly reveals the nature of philosophy only to potential philosophers while protecting philosophy from the many by hiding inconvenient truths, such as his engagement in natural philosophy and rhetoric. This paper differs from his interpretation, in arguing that Socrates does not hide these matters but makes use of them to improve his image because they are already widespread and impossible to suppress. See Leibowitz, pp. 59-60, 111-113.

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