

# The Apology

- Date** ■ 399 B.C.  
**Place** ■ Athens, Greece  
**Type of Source** ■ Speech (original in ancient Greek)  
**Author** ■ Socrates (as recalled by Plato, one of his followers)  
**Historical Context** ■ Following their defeat in the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians looked for people to blame. One of those people was Socrates, who had taught some important pro-Spartan politicians. Socrates had a reputation as a wise man, but others thought of him as an instigator. At age 70, his enemies charged him with not believing in the gods Athenians worshiped and corrupting the youth. Socrates argued in his defense, or apology, that he did believe in divine power and that he only taught the young people who followed him to think for themselves. Socrates had several opportunities to escape the death penalty, but he decided it was more ethical to abide by the court's ruling and so drank the hemlock, a poison, he was given to end his life.

Someone will say: And are you not ashamed, Socrates, of a course of life which is likely to bring you to an untimely end?

To him I may fairly answer: There you are mistaken, a man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong—acting the part of a good man or of a bad. Whereas, according to your view, the heroes who fell at **Troy** were not good for much, and the **son of Thetis** above all, who altogether despised danger in comparison with disgrace; and when his goddess mother said to him, in his eagerness to slay **Hector**, that if he avenged his companion **Patroclus**, and slew Hector, he would die himself — "Fate," as she said, "waits upon you next after Hector"; he, hearing this, utterly despised danger and death, and instead of fearing them, feared rather to live in dishonor, and not to avenge his friend. "Let me die next," he replies, "and be avenged of my enemy, rather than abide here by the **beaked ships**, a scorn and a burden of the earth." Had Achilles any thought of death and danger? For wherever a man's place is, whether the place which he has chosen or that in which he has been placed by a commander, there he ought to remain in the hour of danger; he should not think of death or of anything, but of disgrace. And this, O men of Athens, is a true saying.

Strange, indeed, would be my conduct, O men of Athens, if I who, when I was ordered by the generals whom you chose to command me at **Potidaea** and **Amphipolis** and **Delium**, remained where they placed me, like any other man, facing death; if, I say, now, when, as I conceive and imagine, God orders me to fulfill the philosopher's mission of searching into myself and other men, I were to desert my post through fear of death, or any other fear; that would indeed be strange, and I might justly be arraigned in court for denying the existence of the gods, if I disobeyed the **oracle** because I was afraid of death: then I should be fancying that I was wise when I was not wise. For this fear of death is indeed the pretense of wisdom, and not real

## Troy

*legendary city destroyed by the Greeks in the Trojan War*

## son of Thetis

*Achilles, greatest of all the Greek warriors and hero of Homer's Iliad*

## Hector

*legendary Trojan warrior*

## Patroclus

*friend of Achilles. Patroclus was killed by Hector, who had mistaken him for Achilles.*

## beaked ships

*Greek ships were built to look like sea monsters, often with beak-like projections that were used for ramming*

## Potidaea, Amphipolis, Delium

*sites of battles fought by Athenians in the Peloponnesian War*

## oracle

*message from the gods. Socrates claimed an oracle had said no one was wiser than him and that his actions were all in response to this oracle.*

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wisdom, being the appearance of knowing the unknown; since no one knows whether death, which they in their fear apprehend to be the greatest evil, may not be the greatest good. Is there not here **conceit** of knowledge, which is a disgraceful sort of ignorance? And this is the point in which, as I think, I am superior to men in general, and in which I might perhaps fancy myself wiser than other men, that whereas I know but little of the world below, I do not suppose that I know: but I do know that injustice and disobedience to a better, whether God or man, is evil and dishonorable, and I will never fear or avoid a possible good rather than a certain evil. And therefore if you let me go now, and reject the counsels of **Anytus**, who said that if I were not put to death I ought not to have been prosecuted, and that if I escape now, your sons will all be utterly ruined by listening to my words—if you say to me, Socrates, this time we will not mind Anytus, and will let you off, but upon one condition, that are to inquire and speculate in this way any more, and that if you are caught doing this again you shall die; if this was the condition on which you let me go, I should reply: Men of Athens, I honor and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, **exhorting** anyone whom I meet after my manner, and convincing him, saying: O my friend, why do you who are a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens, care so much about laying up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? Are you not ashamed of this? And if the person with whom I am arguing says: Yes, but I do care; I do not depart or let him go at once; I interrogate and examine and cross-examine him, and if I think that he has no virtue, but only says that he has, I reproach him with undervaluing the greater, and overvaluing the less. And this I should say to everyone whom I meet, young and old, citizen and **alien**, but especially to the citizens, inasmuch as they are my **brethren**. For this is the command of God, as I would have you know; and I believe that to this day no greater good has ever happened in the state than my service to the God. For I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons and your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul. I tell you that virtue is not given by money, but that from virtue come money and every other good of man, public as well as private. This is my teaching, and if this is the doctrine which corrupts the youth, my influence is **ruinous** indeed. But if anyone says that this is not my teaching, he is speaking an untruth. Wherefore, O men of Athens, I say to you, do as Anytus bids or not as Anytus bids, and either acquit me or not; but whatever you do, know that I shall never alter my ways, not even if I have to die many times.

**Source:** Plato, "The Apology," *The Internet Classics Archive*, 1994, <<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>> (May 26, 2011).

**conceit**  
*idea*

**Anytus**  
*one of the prosecutors of Socrates*

**exhorting**  
*encouraging*

**alien**  
*Metics, see Atlas of World History, page 32*

**brethren**  
*brothers*

**ruinous**  
*destructive*