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Xenophon

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Introduction

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Xenophon was born in Athens c. 428 B.C.E. and died c. 354. His family, like that of his contemporary Plato, was fairly well off. His oligarchic, pro-Spartan sympathies probably led to his leaving Athens in 401 B.C.E., and to his formal exile soon after. Once out of Athens, he joined Cyrus the Younger in a failed expedition to capture the Persian throne from his brother Artaxerxes. His *Anabasis* chronicles the expedition and his own part in leading the Greek troops back to Greece. After serving briefly as a mercenary in Thrace, Xenophon fought for Sparta for five years (399–394 B.C.E.). Then for the next thirty years or so, he lived with his wife and two sons as a country gentleman under Spartan protection. His exile was repealed in 369 B.C.E., and he returned to Athens in 365, where he remained until his death.

Xenophon was not a philosopher in any interesting sense. He wrote on hunting, horsemanship, estate management, cavalry command, and military history. His Socrates tends to share these interests, rather than the more philosophical ones familiar from Plato. His general intent was to defend Socrates by portraying him as encouraging young men to become gentlemen like Xenophon himself—free from subjection to their own desires or the authority of an employer, mentally and physically self-disciplined, willing to follow their own good sense where applicable and oracles and divinations elsewhere. Unlike Plato's Socrates, who prefers to ask questions rather than answering them, Xenophon's Socrates is full of practical—and somewhat conservative—advice.

In his *Socrates' Defense to the Jury*, Xenophon's goals are self-advertisedly circumscribed. His aim is not to give a full account of Socrates' trial or even a version of his entire speech of defense. Instead, he aims to solve a problem that seems to have troubled many of his predecessors and has continued to trouble readers of Plato's *Apology*. Socrates, they claim, seems to defy the jury and to weaken his defense in the process. Xenophon thinks that they are right, and he cites Hermogenes' account of Socrates' behavior as evidence. He then argues that this defiance should not be seen as weakness, because it is purposeful. Socrates is tired of living and wants to force the jury to sentence him to death. The contrast with Plato's account couldn't be clearer—or more intriguing.

SOCRATES' DEFENSE TO THE JURY

- 1 I think it's also worth remembering what Socrates thought about his defense and about the end of his life when he was summoned to court. Of course, others have written about this, and all of them have captured his defiant way of speaking, which makes it clear that Socrates really did speak that way. What they don't make clear, though, is that he already believed he would be better off dead, and so they make his defiance seem rather ill considered.
- 2 However, Hermogenes the son of Hipponicus¹ was a friend of Socrates, and the kind of thing he reports about him shows that his defiance was deliberate. He reports, for example, that when he saw him discussing anything and everything rather than the trial, he said
- 3 to him, "Socrates, shouldn't you really have been thinking about what you're going to say in your defense as well?" At first, he replied, "You mean you don't think I've spent my whole life getting ready to make my defense?" Then Hermogenes asked, "How do you mean?" "I mean," he said, "that I've gone through life without doing anything wrong, which I believe is the best way of preparing my defense."
- 4 Hermogenes responded by asking, "Don't you see the Athenian courts often being led astray by a speech and putting people to death when they've done nothing wrong, and just as often setting people free who have done wrong, because their speech made them take pity or flattered them?" "By Zeus, of course I have," Socrates said, "and what's more, I've tried twice now to think about my defense,
- 5 but my daimonic sign² opposed me." "But that's amazing!" Hermogenes said. "Do you really think it's all that amazing," he replied, "that the god³ too should believe I'd be better off dead now? Don't you realize I wouldn't concede to any human being that he has lived a better life than I have up to now? You see, I've known all along that I've lived my entire life piously and justly—and that's very gratifying. And these traits have not only caused me to admire myself, but I've

1. Not much is known about Hermogenes, the brother of Callias (see Plato, *Apology* 20a5). He was a constant companion of Socrates, present at his deathbed (*Phaedo* 59b7–8). He plays an important role in Plato's *Cratylus*.

2. See *Apology* 31c7–d4.

3. Apollo.

found that my friends admire me for them too. But if I grow even older now, I know that I'll have to go through the trials of old age: my sight will deteriorate, I'll hear less and less, and I'll become slower to learn and quicker to forget what I do learn. And if I should realize I'm deteriorating and reproach myself, how would I get any enjoyment out of life?

"It may well be, you know," he went on, "that the god, in his kindness, is letting me leave life not only at the right time, but also in the easiest way. For if sentence is passed against me now, I'll obviously be able to come to the end that—in the judgment of those in charge of the matter—is the easiest for myself, the least trouble for my friends, and the cause of the deepest grief over the departed. For whenever someone leaves his friends with no embarrassing or awkward memories, but passes away when his body is still in good health and his soul still capable of enjoying friendship, how could he fail to be mourned? The gods were right," he said, "to prevent me from working out a speech, just when we thought I should be looking for any possible means of acquittal. Because it's obvious that if I had gone through with this, instead of getting ready to end my life right now, I would only have been getting ready to die amid the sufferings brought on by illness or old age—and old age brings together every manner of hardship and is utterly bereft of consolation. By Zeus, Hermogenes!" he said, "I don't relish that prospect. But as things are, I think I've been so favored by gods and men that if I overburden the jurors by revealing this estimate I have of myself, I'll be choosing to die, instead of preserving my life by begging, which would be to purchase at the price of death a life that's far inferior to it."

Hermogenes said that this was Socrates' frame of mind when he came forward to speak after his opponents had accused him of not acknowledging the gods the city acknowledged, introducing new daimonic activities instead and corrupting the young.⁴ "Gentlemen," he said, "the first thing I find amazing about Meletus is what evidence he could ever have had for saying that I don't acknowledge the gods the city acknowledges. Because anyone who happened to be around would see me making sacrifices at the state festivals and on the public altars—and Meletus himself could have seen this too, if he'd wanted to. And as for introducing *new* daimonic activities, how could I be

4. See *Apology* 24c1 note.

doing that by saying a divine voice clearly indicates to me what I must do? After all, some men actually use birdcalls as voices of divination, and others use what people chance to say. And will anyone dispute that the sound of thunder is a significant voice or that it is the most portentous omen? And doesn't even the Pythia herself, on her tripod, use her voice to proclaim messages from the god?⁵ And then, you know, there's the idea that the god has foreknowledge of the future and prophesies to whomever he wants; and everyone says this and believes it too, in exactly the ways I'm talking about. But while they speak of bird omens, chance sayings, signs, and seers as their prophetic warnings, I call mine a daimonic thing. And I think that in calling it this I'm speaking more truly and more devoutly than those who attribute the power of the gods to birds. Actually, I also have the following proof that I am not falsely attributing things to the god: for I have reported the god's advice to very many of my friends, and I have never yet been shown to be wrong."

14 There was an uproar among the jurors when they heard this. Some of them didn't believe what had been said; others were envious, suspecting that even from the gods he had obtained greater favors than they had. At this Socrates retorted, "Well now, listen to this too, so that those of you who are so inclined may be even more skeptical about how I have been honored by gods. For when Chaerephon once inquired at Delphi about me, Apollo answered before many witnesses that no man was either freer than me, or more just, or more moderate."⁶

15 Since the jurors naturally created an even greater uproar when they heard this latest assertion, Socrates said in response, "But gentlemen! What the god said through the oracle about me was less than what he said about Lycurgus, the Spartan lawgiver.⁷ For they say that when he entered the temple, the god announced, 'I am wondering whether to call you a god or a man.' But he didn't compare *me* to a god—even though he did grant me the distinction of far surpassing other men. Even in this case, however, you shouldn't be too quick to take the god
16 at his word, but examine each of the things he said, one by one. Well then, who do you know who's less enslaved by the body's appetites

5. See *Apology* 21a6 note.

6. See *Apology* 20e6–21a8 and notes.

7. Lycurgus was traditionally taken to be the founder of the Spartan constitution.

than myself? And who's freer than I, since I take neither gifts nor pay from anyone? And who on earth could you reasonably consider more just than someone who's so well adapted to his circumstances that he has no need of anyone else's possessions? And how could anyone reasonably deny that I am a wise man, since as soon as I could understand speech, I began seeking out and learning whatever good things I
17 could and have never stopped doing so since? And don't you think the proof that I haven't been working in vain is just this: that a lot of the citizens who aspire to virtue, and a lot of the foreigners, choose me, rather than anyone else, to spend their time with? And even though everyone knows I have the least money to give in return, a lot of people still want to give me some kind of gift: what shall we say is the reason for that? Or for the fact that no one demands payment of debts from me—but, on the contrary, many people agree they owe me a
18 debt of gratitude? Or that, during the blockade,⁸ while other people took pity on themselves, I was no worse off than when the city was most prosperous? Or that while others acquire expensive luxuries from the market, I get myself greater pleasures than theirs from my own soul, without expense? Now, assuming that no one could convict me of lying in what I've been saying about myself, how could I not now deserve praise from gods and men?

"Despite all that, Meletus, are you saying that I corrupt the young
19 by doing these things? We do know, don't we, what kinds of things corrupt the young; so why don't you say whether you know of anyone who has gone from reverence to impiety because of me, or from modesty to arrogance, or from temperance to extravagance, or from moderate drinking to drunkenness, or from diligence to negligence, or has been overcome by any other base pleasure?"
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"Well yes, by Zeus, I do!" Meletus replied. "I know that those you influence obey you rather than their parents." "I admit it," Socrates replied, "at least where education's concerned. You see, people know this is a special concern of mine. And when it comes to health, people trust doctors rather than their parents. And in the meetings of the assembly, I'm sure that all the Athenians trust the ones who speak with the most intelligence rather than their own relations. And then, of course, don't you choose as generals, in preference to your fathers and your brothers—and even, by Zeus, to your own selves—whom-
ever you regard as having the best judgment about warfare?"

8. Of Athens by Sparta in 405–404 B.C.E. during the Peloponnesian War.

"That's right, Socrates," Meletus said, "because it makes good sense as well as being the established custom."

21 "Well then," Socrates replied, "don't you think it amazing that whereas the best practitioners in other areas of expertise are not only given an appropriate reward, but are also highly esteemed, I myself, who⁹ am considered by some to be the best judge about the greatest good for men—I mean, education—that I am, *for this very reason*, indicted by you on a capital charge?"

22 It's obvious, of course, that Socrates said more than this, and so did friends who spoke on his behalf. But I haven't been concerned to relate everything that went on during the trial; rather, I've been content to show two things: first, that Socrates had always held it of the utmost importance to commit no impiety against the gods or give any appearance of injustice toward men; and secondly, that he nonetheless didn't think he should grovel in order to avoid death,
23 but, on the contrary, he actually believed the right time had come for him to die.

But it was when the sentence had been pronounced that it became even clearer he was thinking this way. For, in the first place, when he was ordered to propose a lesser penalty for himself, he would not do so himself, and he would not allow his friends to either, but he even said it would be an admission of guilt. And then, secondly, when his companions wanted to smuggle him away, he would not go along with it, but he even seemed to make fun of them, asking them whether they perhaps knew of some place outside Attica not accessible to death.

24 When at last the verdict was given, Hermogenes reports that Socrates said, "Well, gentlemen, those who coached the witnesses to perjure themselves and give false testimony against me, and those who complied with their instructions, must be conscious of grievous impiety and injustice on their own part. But as for myself, why should I think any less of myself than before I was condemned? After all, it hasn't been in the least proven that I have done any of the things for which I was indicted. For it hasn't been shown that I make sacrifices or swear oaths to any new daimonic beings in place of Zeus, Hera, and the gods of that pantheon; nor has it been shown that I acknowledge
25 other gods. And how on earth could I corrupt the young, by training

9. Reading ὄτι with Stephanus.

them in thrift and endurance? Moreover, when it comes to the crimes that do carry the death penalty—sacrilege, burglary, enslavement, high treason—even the prosecutors themselves don't accuse me of committing any of them. So it strikes me as amazing that you can ever have thought what I've done deserves the death penalty.

"Nor should the fact that I'm being put to death unjustly lead me 26 to have a worse opinion of myself in the slightest. I mean, that's a disgrace to those who have sentenced me; it is no disgrace to me. Far from it. Actually, I find consolation in no less a figure than Palamedes,¹⁰ who came to an end quite similar to my own. For even now, he still lays claim to much finer eulogies than Odysseus,¹¹ who killed him unjustly. And I know posterity will attest—as the past has done—that I've never yet behaved unjustly toward anyone nor done anything at all shameful, and that I benefited the people who conversed with me, by teaching them free of charge anything good that I could."

After saying that, he walked away in a manner very much in keep- 27 ing with what he'd said, since he was extremely cheerful in expression, bearing, and gait. And when he realized his followers were weeping, he said, "What's this? You're weeping, even now? Why, haven't you long known that there has been a death sentence pronounced against me by nature ever since I was born? However, if I perish at a time when good things might still befall me, then obviously that would be painful for me, as well as for those who wish me well. But if I bring my life to an end at a time when hardships are in store, then I think all of you should be happy at my good fortune."

Now, a certain Apollodorus¹² was there, a man who was extremely 28 fond of Socrates but otherwise a bit simpleminded. "But Socrates," he said, "the thing that I find especially hard to bear is seeing you being put to death unjustly." Hermogenes says that Socrates stroked his head and replied with a good-natured laugh, "Apollodorus, my dearest friend, would you prefer to see me being put to death justly instead?"

It's also said that when he saw Anytus¹³ there he said, "Well, this 29 man here is proud of himself as if he'd done a great and noble thing.

10. See *Apology* 41b2 note.

11. See *Apology* 41c1 note.

12. See *Apology* 34a2–3 note; *Phaedo* 117d3–6.

13. See *Apology* 18b2 note.

- He's having me put to death because when I saw that he was deemed worthy of the greatest honors by the city, I said that he shouldn't confine his son's education to tanning hides. The man is so corrupt that he seems not to realize that, of the two of us, the real victor is the one who has achieved what is more beneficial and noble for all time. Furthermore," he went on, "Homer, too, attributes to some of those who are coming to the end of their lives the power to foretell the future; and so I also want to prophesize. You see, I once had some brief acquaintance with Anytus' son, and he didn't strike me as a weak-minded man. So I declare that he will not persevere in that slavish way of life his father has prepared for him; but for want of a good man to take care of him, he'll succumb to some shameful desire and sink deep into depravity."
- 30 What he said was right. The youth took to wine, couldn't stop drinking day or night, and ended up utterly worthless to his city, his friends, and himself. So Anytus, even though dead, also acquired a bad reputation, due to the bad upbringing he gave his son and his own bad judgment.
- 31 Socrates, by singing his own praises in court, then, brought the resentment of the jurors down upon himself and forced them to condemn him all the more. To my mind, however, he met with the fate of those who are loved by the gods. I mean, he escaped the most irksome part of life and had the easiest of deaths. And he demonstrated the strength of his character: when he realized it was better for him to die than to carry on living, he showed no weakness in the face of death—any more than he turned his back on any other good thing—but accepted it, and went to meet it, in good spirits.
- 32 As for myself, knowing as I do the man's wisdom and nobility of character, it's impossible for me to forget him or to remember him without praising him. And if anyone who seeks virtue has met with any more beneficial companion than Socrates, I consider him worthy of being called the most blessed of all.
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Further Reading

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