Plato's Apology of Socrates:
An Interpretation, with a New Translation
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How you, men of Athens, have been affected by my accusers, 17a
I do not know. For my part, I nearly forgot myself because of
them, so persuasively did they speak. And yet they have said,
so to speak, nothing true. I was most amazed by one of the
many falsehoods they told, when they said that you should
beware that you are not deceived by me, since I am a clever[1]
speaker. They are not ashamed that they will immediately be b
refuted by me in deed, as soon as it becomes apparent that I am
not a clever speaker at all; this seemed[2] to me to be most shame-
less of them, unless perhaps they call a clever speaker the one
who speaks the truth. If this is what they are saying, then I too
would agree that I am an orator—but not of their sort. These
men, then, as I say, have said little or nothing true, while from
me you will hear the whole truth—but by Zeus, men of Athens,
not beautifully spoken speeches[3] like theirs, ordered and
adorned[4] with phrases and words; rather, what you hear will be c
spoken at random[5] in the words that I happen upon—for I trust
that the things I say are just—and let none of you expect oth-
erwise. For surely it would not be becoming, men, for someone
of my age to come before you fabricating[6] speeches like a youth.
And, men of Athens, I do beg and beseech this of you: if you
hear me speaking in my defense[7] with the same speeches I am
accustomed to speak both in the market at the money-tables,[8]
where many of you have heard me, and elsewhere, do not be
amazed nor make a disturbance[9] because of this. For this is how d

17d it is: now is the first time I have come before a law court, at the age of seventy; hence I am simply[10] foreign to the manner of speech here. So just as, if I really[11] did happen to be a foreigner, you would surely sympathize with me if I spoke in that dialect[12] 18a and way in which I was raised, so I do beg this of you now (and it is just, as it seems to me): disregard the manner of my speech—for perhaps it may be worse, but perhaps better—and instead consider this very thing and apply your mind to this: whether the things I say are just or not. For this is the virtue[13] of a judge, while that of an orator is to speak the truth.

So first, men of Athens, it is just for me to speak in defense against the first false charges against me and the first accusers, and afterwards against the later charges and the later accusers. b For many have accused me to you, many years ago now, saying nothing true; and I fear them more than Anytus[14] and those with him, although they too are dangerous. But the others are more dangerous, men. They got hold of many of you from childhood, and they accused me and persuaded you—although it is no more true than the present charge—that there is a certain Socrates, a wise man,[15] a thinker[16] on the things aloft, who has investigated all things under the earth, and who makes the c weaker speech the stronger.[17] Those, men of Athens, who have scattered this report about, are my dangerous accusers. For their listeners hold that investigators of these things also do not believe in[18] gods. Besides, there are many of these accusers, and they have been accusing for a long time now. Moreover, they spoke to you at that age when you were most trusting, when some of you were children and youths, and they accused me in a case which simply went by default, for no one spoke in my defense. And the most unreasonable thing of all is that it is not d even possible to know and to say their names, unless one of them happens to be a comic poet.[19] Those who persuaded you by using envy and slander[20]—and those who persuaded others, after being convinced themselves—all of these are most difficult to get at. For it is also not possible to have any one of them come forward here and to refute him, but it is a necessity for me simply to speak in my defense as though fighting with shadows and refuting with no one to answer. So you, too, must deem it to be as I say: that there have been two groups of accusers, the

ones accusing me now, and the others long ago of whom I speak; and you must also suppose that I should first speak in defense against the latter, for you heard them accusing me earlier and much more than these later ones here. 18e

Well, then. A defense speech must be made, men of Athens, and an attempt must be made in this short time to take away your prejudice, which you got during a long time. I would wish it to turn out like this, if it were in any way better both for you and for me, and I would rather wish to accomplish something through my defense speech. But I suppose this is difficult, and I am not at all unaware of what sort of thing it is. Nevertheless, let this proceed in whatever way is dear to the god, but the law must be obeyed and a defense speech must be made. 19a

So let us take up from the beginning what the accusation is, from which has arisen the slander against me—which, in fact, is what Meletus[21] trusted in when he wrote this indictment against me. Well, then. What did the slanderers say to slander me? Their sworn statement, just as though they were accusers, must be read: "Socrates does injustice[22] and is meddlesome, by investigating the things under the earth and the heavenly things, and by making the weaker speech the stronger, and by teaching others these same things." It is something like this. For you yourselves also saw these things in the comedy of Aristophanes: a certain Socrates was borne about there, asserting that he was treading on air, and spouting much other drivel about which I comprehend nothing, either much or little.[23] And I do not say this to dishonor this sort of understanding,[24] if anyone is wise in such things (may I never be prosecuted with such indictments[25] by Meletus!); but I, men of Athens, have no share in these matters. Again, I offer the many[26] of you as witnesses, and I maintain that you should teach and tell each other, as many of you as have ever heard me conversing—and there are many such among you—tell each other, then, if any of you ever heard me conversing about such things, either much or little, and from this you will know that the same holds for the other things which the many say about me. b c d

But in fact none of these things is so; and if you have heard from anyone that I try to educate human beings[27] and that I charge money for it, that is not true either. Although this also e

19e seems to me to be noble,[28] if one is able to educate human beings, like Gorgias of Leontini, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis.[29] For each of them, men, is able to go into each of the cities and persuade the young—who can associate with whomever of their own citizens they wish for free—they per-
20a suade these young men to leave off associating with the latter, and to associate with themselves instead, and to give them money and owe them thanks besides.

And for that matter, there is another man here, from Paros, a wise man, who I heard was in town; for I happened to go to a man who has paid more money to sophists than all the others, Callias, the son of Hipponicus.[30] So I questioned him (for he has two sons):

"Callias," I said, "If your two sons had been born colts or calves, we would have been able to get and pay a master for
b them who could make the two of them noble and good[31] in their appropriate virtue, and this man would have been from among those either skilled with horses or skilled in farming. But now, since they are two human beings, whom do you have in mind to get as a master[32] for the two of them? Who understands such virtue, that of human being and citizen? For I suppose you have considered it, since you possess sons. Is there someone," I said, "or not?"

"Certainly," he said.

"Who," I said, "and where is he from, and for how much does he teach?"

"Evenus," he said, "Socrates, from Paros: five minae."[33]

And I looked on Evenus as blessed if he should truly have this
c art[34] and teaches at such a modest rate. As for myself, I would plume[35] and pride myself on it, if I understood these things. But I do not understand them, men of Athens.

Perhaps, then, one of you might retort, "But, Socrates, what is it that you do?[36] Where have these slanders against you come from? For surely if you were practicing nothing more uncommon than others, such a report and account would not have arisen, unless you were doing something different from the
d many. Tell us what it is, then, so that we do not deal rashly with you."

In this, it seems to me, what the speaker says is just, and I will

try to demonstrate to you what it is that has brought me this 20d
name[37] and slander. So listen. And perhaps I will seem to some
of you to be joking. Know well, however, that I will tell you the
whole truth. For I, men of Athens, have gotten this name
through nothing but a certain wisdom. What sort of wisdom,
then, is this? Just what is perhaps human wisdom; for I am
really likely to be wise in this. But those of whom I just spoke
might perhaps be wise in some wisdom greater than human, or e
else I cannot say what it is. For I, at least, do not understand it,
but whoever declares that I do lies and speaks in order to slan-
der me.

Do not, men of Athens, make a disturbance against me, not
even if I seem to you somehow to boast. For not mine is the
story that I will tell,[38] but I will refer it to a speaker trustworthy
to you. Of my wisdom, if indeed it is anything, and what sort of
thing it is, I will offer for you as witness the god in Delphi. Now
you know Chaerephon,[39] no doubt. He was my comrade from
youth as well as a comrade of your multitude, and he shared in 21a
the recent exile[40] and returned with you. You do know what sort
of man Chaerephon was, how vehement he was in whatever he
would set out to do. Once he even went to Delphi and dared to
consult the oracle about this—as I say, do not make a distur-
bance, men—he asked whether there is anyone wiser than I.
The Pythia[41] replied that no one is wiser. Of these things his
brother here will be a witness for you, since he himself has died.

Now consider why I say these things; for I am going to teach b
you where the slander against me has come from. When I heard
these things, I pondered them like this: "What ever is the god
saying, and what riddle is he uttering? For I am aware that I am
not at all wise, either much or little. So what is he saying when
he asserts that I am wisest? Surely he is not saying something
false; for that is not lawful[42] for him." And for a long time I was
at a loss about what ever he was saying, but then very reluc-
tantly I turned to something like the following investigation of
it.

I went to one of those reputed[43] to be wise, supposing that
there, if anywhere, I would refute the divination[44] and show the c
oracle, "This man is wiser than I, but you declared that I was."
So I considered this man thoroughly—I need not speak of him

21c by name, but he was one of the politicians[45]—and when I considered him and conversed with him, men of Athens, I was affected something like this: it seemed to me that this man seemed to be wise, both to many other human beings and most of all to himself, but that he was not. And then I tried to show him that he supposed he was wise, but was not. So from this I
d became hateful both to him and to many of those present.

At any rate, as I went away, I reckoned with myself: "I am wiser than this human being. For neither of us is likely to know anything noble and good, but he supposes he knows something when he does not know, while I, just as I do not know, do not suppose I do. I *am* likely to be wiser than he in just this little something: that what I do not know, I do not suppose I know."

From there I went to someone else, one of those reputed to be
e wiser than that man, and these things seemed to me to be the same. And there I became hateful both to that man and to many others.

After this, then, I kept going to one after another, all the while perceiving with pain and fear that I was becoming hateful. Nevertheless, it seemed to be necessary to regard the matter of the god as most important. So I had to go, in seeking what the oracle was saying, to all those reputed to know something. And
22a by the dog,[46] men of Athens—for it is necessary to speak the truth before you—I was affected something like this: those with the best reputations seemed to me nearly the most deficient, in my investigation in accordance with the god, while others with more paltry reputations seemed to be men more fit in regard to prudence.[47]

Indeed, I must display to you how I wandered, as if performing certain labors,[48] so that the divination would become irrefutable for me. After the politicians I went to the poets of tragedies
b and dithyrambs, and the others, so that there I would catch myself in the act of being more ignorant than they. So I would take up those poems of theirs which it seemed to me they had worked on the most, and I would ask them thoroughly what they meant,[49] so that I might also learn something from them at the same time. I am ashamed to tell you the truth, men; nevertheless, it must be said. Almost all of those present, so to speak, would have spoken better than they did, about the poetry which

they themselves had made. So again, also concerning the poets, I quickly recognized that they did not make[50] what they made by wisdom, but by a certain nature[51] and while inspired,[52] like the diviners and those who deliver oracles. For they also speak many beautiful things, but they know nothing of what they speak. It was apparent to me that the poets are also affected in the same sort of way. At the same time, I perceived that they supposed, on account of their poetry, that they were the wisest of human beings also in the other things, in which they were not. So I went away from there too supposing that I excelled them in the very same thing in which I did the politicians. 22b c

Finally, then, I went to the manual artisans. For I was aware that I understood nothing, so to speak, but I knew that I would discover that they understood many beautiful things. And I was not wrong about this: they did understand things which I did not understand, and in this way they were wiser than I. But, men of Athens, the good craftsmen also seemed to me to make the same mistake as the poets: because he performed his art beautifully, each one deemed himself wisest also in the other things, the greatest things—and this mistake of theirs seemed to hide that wisdom. So I questioned myself on behalf of the oracle, whether I would prefer to be as I am, being in no way wise in their wisdom nor ignorant in their ignorance, or to have both things which they have. I answered myself and the oracle that it profits me to remain just as I am. d e

Out of this examination, men of Athens, many hatreds have arisen against me, and the kind which are harshest and gravest; as a result, many slanders have arisen from them, and I got this name of being "wise." For those present on each occasion suppose that I myself am wise in the things about which I refute someone else. But it is likely, men, that really the god is wise, and that in this oracle he is saying that human wisdom is worth little or nothing. And he appears to say this of Socrates, and to use my name, in order to make me an example, as if he would say, "That one of you, O human beings, is wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that in truth he is worth nothing with respect to wisdom." 23a b