The Trial of Socrates: The Real Reasons

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**Preface**

Socrates was born in 470 BCE, after the Persian war, and 40 years before the Peloponesian war. Due to the victory over Persia, Athens was in a golden age. The polis became a center for the arts and education. This meant Socrates grew up in the ideal time for philosophical thought. He was in a place where individual thought was valued, as Athens was a democracy, and the ability to convince others of your ideas was even more valuable. Although Athens was doing very well, because it was a democracy there were always tensions between it and Sparta. Then due to various smaller conflicts between the two, the threat of a Spartan attack and an oligarchical takeover of Athens was on every Athenian's mind. So, when the Peloponnesian war began between Athens and Sparta this threat was only increased. This meant during the middle of Socrate’s life tensions in Athens were high, and at 70 years old he was put on trial for corrupting the youth and opposing the Athenian religion. But were these the real reasons? Why was Socrates put on trial? Socrates was put on trial because of his outspokenness about his disdain for some Athenian ideals, the actions of his followers and apprentices, and the recent political changes in Athens.

In this paper I will first cover some of Socrates controversial beliefs and how outspoken he was about them. Secondly, I will talk about the actions of his followers and students and how those affected his reputation. Lastly, I will discuss the three events that happened in Athens that deeply changed the political nature of the polis, and were the final straws that caused Socrates' trial. In this paper I used I.F. Stone’s book *The Trial of Socrates*, and Plato’s dialogue *Apology* as my primary sources. I chose the trial of Socrates as my topic because I’ve always been interested in philosophy, and recently discovered an interest in Athens and ancient Greece. This made this topic seem like the perfect fit. I would like to thank Ms. Lorencz, a speech and communication instructor at Dakota County Technical College.

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Socrates was raised in a period of Athens where education and intellectual pursuits were highly valued. After studying philosophy with multiple different teachers he eventually became a sophist. Soon he would be debating any elder or anyone of any significance he could find. During this time he would develop his own style of debate that would become known as the Socratic method. He did this for many years and gained many young followers, but also gained a lot of contempt among the older Athenians for his differing opinions on many Athenian ideals. Eventually at age 71 he was put on trial for corrupting the youth and denying the Athenian gods. He was convicted and sentenced to death. But, why was he really put on trial, what happened during his life that led to the trial? Socrates was put on trial because of how his outspokenness about his disdain for some Athenian ideals influenced the actions of his followers and students, who in turn caused societal and political chaos in Athens.

Socrates grew up in a time where philosophy was mainly focused on religion and ideas about the universe. But, Socrates was more interested in “value theory and ethics''.[[1]](#footnote-0) He believed that the Athenian religious education system taught people that they shouldn't try to be good because in some way every action would offend the god of something. For example, from the beginning of one of Euripides’ plays “the goddess Aphrodite vows to destroy Hippolytus because he slights her, the goddess of lust. If

mortals are too chaste, they will offend the goddess of lust; if mortals are too sober, they will offend the god of wine and strong drink; if they are too just, they will dishonor the god of deceit.”[[2]](#footnote-1) This was almost opposite of what Socrates believed. He thought that

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virtue and moral goodness were the most important qualities to pursue and obtain throughout your life.[[3]](#footnote-2) Socrates spent his life pursuing these ideals while also trying to get others to join him in this pursuit. It was so important to him that he be virtuous and moral that he would constantly engage himself and others in dialogues in order to discover the best principles. This is how he developed the Socratic method. He would ask a series of questions, usually starting with simple questions, that got progressively more difficult to answer. He would eventually lead the person to admitting a flaw in their belief. One example of his method is in Plato’s Apology when Socrates defends himself, he talks to Meletus, one of his accusers, about the nature of his religious beliefs.

Then, by the gods, Meletus, of whom we are speaking, tell me and the court, in somewhat plainer terms, what you mean! for I do not as yet understand whether you affirm that I teach others to acknowledge some gods, and therefore do believe in gods and am not an entire atheist - this you do not lay to my charge; but only that they are not the same gods which the city recognizes - the charge is that they are different gods. Or, do you mean to say that I am an atheist simply, and a teacher of atheism?[[4]](#footnote-3)

This method was useful for not just winning debates, but also discovering new ideas and beliefs. Although always debating others can be a great intellectual pursuit, it can often make you enemies with many people, especially when touching on topics considered sacred.

Athens and the rest of the ancient world held strong beliefs in gods and religion. Socrates would often argue that the uncritical acceptance of gods, religions, and myths lead to absurd conclusions about our world and how we should act. Socrates believed that a person should hold as many true beliefs and as few false ones as possible, so when he saw people simply accept the Athenian gods and religions as a true belief, he

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felt compelled to help them clear the false beliefs and discover true ones.[[5]](#footnote-4) However Socrates himself wasn't irreligious. Multiple times he claimed to have a divine inner voice that would talk to him during important decisions or times when he was making wrong choices. When it came to the way people worshipped and what they believed about the gods, most thought the gods wanted people to revere and worship them. Socrates thought that if these gods deserve our worship they are moral beings and would want their people to act justly and with moral goodness. Therefore, the best way to worship them was to pursue moral goodness and virtue. Although he held disdain for the beliefs of many religious people, Socrates still had respect for the religious traditions of Athens. [[6]](#footnote-5)

Democracy was a defining characteristic of Athens and an idea and institution that was very important and loved by Athenians. But, Socrates had some problems with it. As someone who placed extreme value in critical analysis of beliefs, he thought that the average citizen would not be educated enough in rational thought to effectively vote for the best candidate.[[7]](#footnote-6) Socrates has a discussion with Adeimantus in Plato’s Book Six of The Republic, where he makes an analogy with a ship heading out to sea. He asks Adeimantus if he would rather have random people pick a captain for his voyage or people with experience and knowledge of ships and the sea. Adeimantus answers the latter, to which Socrates responds, then why should any average person be fit to decide who leads Athens? Despite this belief he didn't argue for voting restrictions, instead he

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believed in a philosopher king, a ruler who pursues and possesses wisdom, virtue, knowledge, a simple life, and philosophical thought. It was often pointed out that these people wouldn’t want to rule, to which Socrates would say that people who don't want political power are the ones who can be trusted with it. He never tried to act on these ideas directly, but he did try to spread them to as many people as possible.[[8]](#footnote-7)

The people who followed Socrates were usually very passionate about their ideas, and were willing to take actions he didn’t necessarily support. Those actions reflected negatively on Socrates. Because Socrates was always willing to debate even the most respected and revered people, he developed a following of mostly young men. They enjoyed seeing their elders being outsmarted, and so naturally they were attracted to Socrates. As a side effect of these debates the young men would come to accept and support many of Socrates' ideas and act upon them. [[9]](#footnote-8) This is most apparent during the Peloponnesian war when Athens surrendered to Sparta and the Rule of 30 was installed, an oligarchical group of 30 men who ruled Athens. In order to protect the 30, Sparta gave them guards, many of whom were young men armed with whips who would keep the citizens in order. These guards were seen as the youth that Socrates corrupted, as his ideas were typically anti-democratic. Although his views were not specifically pro oligarchy, it is still hard to deny that his influence created young men who were distrustful of democracy and wanted some kind of change.[[10]](#footnote-9)

Socrates didn’t just have followers, he also directly taught and influenced many more significant people whose actions would even more so reflect on Socrates. Critias

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was a student and associate of Socrates and a cousin of Plato, Socrates's most famous student. Socrates and Critias are seen in many of Plato’s dialogues, however in most of them Critias is more of a peacemaking force during the debates. After Athens surrendered to Sparta and the Rule of 30 was installed, Critias was made one of the leaders. What followed was the death of the democracy and many Athenian citizens, as the oligarchy was not merciful in its ways of controlling its citizens. During this time Socrates still talked to Critias, but he was usually criticising him, Socrates says to Critias “if someone was a herdsman and made his cattle fewer and more poor, would he not agree that he was a bad herdsman; yet it is a great wonder, if someone was a leader of a city and made his citizens fewer and poorer, that he would not be ashamed nor think himself a bad leader of a city”.[[11]](#footnote-10) The fact that Socrates taught someone who would go on to commit the most blatant attack on the Athenian democracy certainly didn’t make him popular among Athenians.

Another one of Socrates' students was Alcibiades. He and Socrates became incredibly close after fighting in multiple military campaigns together, and each saving the other's life. However, Alcibiades was very extravagant and self-centered. This conflicted with Socrates' beliefs, but he still saw intellectual promise in Alcibiades. Socrates wanted to try to help Alcibiades become a better person, but he eventually betrayed Socrates. Alcibiades chose a life of politics that Socrates disapproved of, and went back to his indulgent ways. He would go on to be an accomplished member of the military and convinced Athens to start a military campaign in Syracuse. However, upon

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arriving there he was sent back to Athens to face trial for a crime. On his way back he escaped to Sparta, where he told the Spartans to send support to Syracuse and other Athenian plans. This caused the expedition to completely fail and all of the fleet to be captured and destroyed, this was a massive blow to Athens because their navy was the only thing keeping them in the fight against Sparta. The Delian league was a group of poleis formed by Athens after the persian war to continue a defense against them, but eventually it evolved into something close to an Athenian empire. Their support was crucial to Athens during the peloponnesian war, and Alcibiades and the scicillian expedition caused them to stop supporting Athens.[[12]](#footnote-11) Once again we have a student of Socrates going on to cause incredible harm to Athens and it’s democracy.

Socrates was 70 when he was put on trial, but he had been allegedly corrupting the youth and arguing against the gods for all his life, so what changed? There were two major changes in Athens that affected the political climate and caused popular opinion on Socrates to change. The first event happened after the Sicilian disaster and the Delian league withdrawing its support from Athens. General Peisander, an Athenian general, took advantage of how weak Athens was. He went to many of Athens' small subject cities and changed policy there making the democracies into oligarchies.[[13]](#footnote-12) This created support for an oligarchical takeover of Athens. When General Peisander and his fellow conspirators made it to Athens, the secret clubs made it easier for him to start working. They killed the most prominent member of the democratic party then, and

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would kill anyone who spoke against them. The fear these actions caused made the threat seem larger than it was. An oligarchy called the 400 would eventually emerge, but would only rule for a few months.[[14]](#footnote-13) Although it was short lived, the fact that democracy was overthrown and the threat seemed so large many Athenian were rightfully more on edge.

The second event was another oligarchy. In 404 BCE after Athens surrendered to Sparta, the Rule of 30, led by Critias, overthrew the Athenian democracy. Although Socrates was against this tyrannical oligarchy, he was so openly against democracy that it was difficult to separate himself from this oligarchy. His own student led the overthrow and other followers were the guards for the Rule of 30. Both of these oligarchies were tyrannical and restrictive on freedoms. These two events affected Athens so much because it was a polis built on free speech and democracy. In a place like Athens where countless artists of all varieties came to express themselves and their opinions, free speech was crucial. When these values were undermined twice by two different oligarchies, Athenians had every right to be fearful of another oligarchy and the people perceived to cause them. The clearest target was Socrates, the man who taught and influenced all of these conspirators.

Socrates’s openness and confrontational method of debate attracted a large and passionate following that often acted in ways Socrates’ himself wouldn’t have. It is likely that Socrates might not have been put on trial for just his controversial beliefs that challenged the status quo and the actions of his passionate followers. He wasn’t

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charged with crimes until he was 70 years old. Political chaos in Athens changed how Athenians viewed people like Socrates. Why was Socrates put on trial? He was put on trial for the acts committed under the influence of his philosophy. Socrates whether he meant to or not influenced many young men, through his unique style of debate and outspokenness. These men would go on to cause political chaos in Athens which would fundamentally change Athenian politics and society, in a way that would make what seemed to be well meaning debate on Socrates part seem more like attempts to disrupt Athenian democracy. Many philosophers are remembered for their specific philosophies, but few are remembered as the point where philosophy took a turn. He was so influential that every philosopher before him is called a pre-socratic. Socrates brought philosophy away from speculation about the universe, and down to earth to figure out the nature of morality and ethics. This is his biggest contribution to philosophy and the world.

Annotated Bibliography

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Stone, I. F. *The Trial of Socrates*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.

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2. Graham, "Socrates' Mission," 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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4. Plato, *Apology*, 400 BCE, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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7. I. F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 9-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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