

Title: Plato's Crito

Prompt: In response to Crito's offer to help him escape execution, Socrates says that he is and has always been the sort of person who is:

“persuaded by nothing within me except the argument that on rational reflection seems best to me”. (*Crito* 46b)

What considerations does Socrates maintain should be used in deciding what is the best argument here? What is his attitude towards majority opinion? Explain the main points of Socrates' case that he should submit to the death penalty even though the verdict against him was unjust. Is Socrates' obedience to the will of democratic Athens compatible with his attitude towards majority opinion? In your view, does Socrates successfully justify his choice? Justify your response.

Grade: A-

Reflection: This was both my first college and my first philosophy paper. While the papers I wrote in high school stand better written in terms of style and flow, due to the large amount of time we were given to write them and, more importantly, my greater concern for style all-together, none approached the *personal* analytical thinking involved even in this very basic piece.

In Socrates “rational reflection” on the arguments provided by Crito to escape execution he emphasizes that the actions they are to take should reflect the conclusion of thorough examination (Crito 46b). Therefore the method in which Socrates determines his actions is through an appeal to logos or reasoning, as he claims is the status quo. That is to say, Socrates is solely concerned about taking the most just choice of action despite his unfortunate situation. For his justification, Socrates first argues for dismissing the opinions of the majority in favor of concerning one’s self with obtaining a just life; he then utilizes this conclusion in order to introduce the character of the Laws of Athens who challenge Socrates on behalf of the city about the agreement of citizenship. By relying on the city laws and community to bring the case of justice, one might question how Socrates could reject the importance of the majority opinion and obey his sentence with such fervor when the city laws and community of democratic Athens themselves appear to be chiefly the result of the will of the majority. In order to address this question and evaluate Socrates’ justification, we must first understand his argument.

The first major point examined by Socrates is the validity of the opinion of the majority. Socrates argues that it is not the opinion of the majority that matters at all, but instead the opinions of the wise, if such men exist. Socrates explains that just as an athlete should ignore the conditioning advice of everyone but his doctor or trainer or else face possible degradation of their body, a just person should only consider the opinions of those good or wise or else face possible corruption of their soul. Even when presented with the reality of the ability of the majority to put him to death, Socrates maintains his position on the grounds that the extremity of their power does not alter the justice of the action. Through this discussion, Socrates presents an important assumption which he uses to build further argument with respect to the Laws of Athens: “the most important thing isn’t living, but living well” (*Crito* 48b).

Socrates then goes on to equate living well with living justly. With this established, Socrates lays the rest of his argument on the importance of behaving justly with respect to the city. The first argument Socrates presents with this relationship to Athens begins with the assertion that one should never do injustice on the grounds that it is bad and shameful, even if one has experienced injustice themselves. Similarly, Socrates and Crito conclude that it is not just to disregard one's agreements. Therefore Socrates concludes that to escape his sentence would be to harm the city through a breach of agreement or contract under the laws.

Next, Socrates introduces the character of the "Laws and the city community" of Athens which in turn question the potential actions of the pair and explain the inherent agreement under the laws. The first question posed by the Laws is to ask why Socrates believes he can ignore the legal ruling of the city. The expected response, that is to say that the city has ruled unjustly, brings forward the next component of the Laws' argument.

The Laws, in order to address the justice behind the ruling, bring up the idea of the agreement between Socrates and Athens. Both Socrates and Crito agree that the Laws have provided them with "birth, upbringing, and education" and "a share of all the fine things we could" (*Crito* 51d). In other words, Socrates pronounces that the citizens of Athens owe their livelihoods to the city and its laws. Whether this is a literal debt of gratitude or a necessity for peace within the city is unclear. This ambiguity is dismissible because the conclusion on what actions to take remain the same. Furthermore, this bond between Athens and its citizens is said by the Laws to be stronger than that of a parent and their children. This point becomes important later when the Laws conclude that to escape from his execution would be to violate his contractual agreement and thus for Socrates to harm the city to his fullest extent.

Before the Laws reach this conclusion they first establish the legitimacy of the Athenian government. To do this, the Laws state that anyone entering adulthood, after experiencing the

ways in which the city is conducted, is allowed to leave the city with their property. On the other hand, by choosing to stay in the city of Athens each citizen is said to have agreed to follow the rule of law. Moreover, if a citizen is not satisfied with the law they are given the alternative to persuade the city otherwise. Between these two options, a citizen is determined to have accepted the authority of the city of which to disobey is to act unjustly in a most serious way.

This agreement, the Laws note, is particularly applicable to Socrates given his behavior with respect to Athens over his lifetime. The Laws observe that while most Athenians travel abroad for festivals or to experience other cities, Socrates remained distinctly planted in Athens. The Laws thusly use this as evidence for Socrates' acceptance of the agreement described previously. Furthermore, the Laws cite the very arguments used by Socrates during his trial, namely that Socrates would rather face death than exile from Athens, as further support for the agreement. That is to say, if Socrates were to escape his sentence now he would not only violate the agreement set out by his actions over his lifetime but also his direct commitments stated during his defense speech.

Finally, the Laws further make the argument against escape by describing the life Socrates would adopt if he were to act as Crito wishes. First, they mention that the friends of Socrates would become at risk of being exiled or disenfranchised at the will of the state. Then, the Laws state that if Socrates were to live in a new city of just men, he would ultimately become an "enemy of their political system" and known as one who "undermines laws" (*Crito* 53b). By escaping, Socrates will also affirm the decision of the trial by exposing the injustice of his character. On the other hand, if Socrates were to choose to live in an unjust city, he would surely find himself with an unfulfilling life; he would no longer be able to associate with just people and undergo discourse with them about the human soul. Finally, the Laws note Socrates' old age

and future sheltered existence in which his escape would only buy him a few more years of a most inactive life, as well as one unrewarded in the afterlife.

The final arguments presented by the Laws can be seen as practical rather than necessarily ethical, unlike their first arguments that are centered on the agreement between Socrates and his city. In this sense, I believe it is the first arguments that make up the majority of the appeal while the later arguments exist to exemplify the realities of an unjust life. For Socrates, if he really does believe that the unjust life is unlivable for its own sake, the negative consequences that result from acting unjustly are unnecessary. Socrates' obedience to the city and his sentence, then, derives from these first arguments rather than the latter.

The early arguments presented by the Laws center on the inherent agreement between Socrates and Athens along with the legitimacy of the Athenian government and Socrates' citizenship. Due to the nature in which Socrates introduces these two components, it appears that the legitimacy of this agreement—which ultimately convinces Socrates to accept his sentence—is dependent upon the behavior of the Athens itself. The behavior of Athens is then, according to the arguments of the Laws stated previously, determined by how well the city provides for its citizens and how free they are to disagree with the city, modify its laws, or all together leave with their property intact. With this distinction, we can now properly assess the apparent contradiction between Socrates' disapproval of the majority opinion and acceptance of the democratic Athenian law.

According to our definition of the behavior of Athens, the city derives its legitimacy not necessarily from its democratic structure but rather its socially good deeds and governance. Take for example a scenario in which Athens is instead ruled by a dictator. If this new Athens were to behave in such a fashion as to provide for its citizens and somehow give them the political freedom associated with democratic Athens, I take it that Socrates would similarly insist on the

legitimacy of the agreement in question. While it might seem unlikely that these political freedoms would arise under a dictator with absolute control, the point still stands that democracy and the respect for the opinion of the majority is not required to establish this contract. Therefore Socrates' acceptance of the agreement is independent from the democratic political structure of Athens and also not mutually exclusive with his opinion towards the majority.

If this is to be understood as the main component of Socrates' reasoning for accepting the result of his trial, then the validity of Socrates' overall argument can be assessed from it as well. Thus Socrates decision to accept his punishment is justified so long as the behavior of Athens sufficiently meets the criteria laid out by the Laws. By meeting the sufficient criteria, the contractual agreement of citizenship between the laws of Athens and Socrates is legitimized. This leads Socrates to rightly conclude to accept the ruling of the city and face his sentence as accordance to his presupposed views on justice.