

Basic structure of dialogue

Socrates faces a number of charges. Some are explicitly raised by Meletus, his prosecutor. Others, he claims, are implicit accusations. The first two in the list are the implicit accusations. The second two are Meletus' explicit charges.

1. He studies things in the heavens and below the earth
 2. He makes the worse argument into the stronger (better) argument.
 3. Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young
 4. Socrates does not believe in the gods of the city
- 17a–24b: S's defense against the implicit accusation.
 - 24b–35d: S's defense against the explicit charges; found guilty
 - 35e–38b: S proposes as "punishment" that he be given free meals in the Prytaneum; sentenced to death
 - 38c–42a: S's parting words

Defense Against Implicit Accusation

Socrates defends himself against the implicit accusations by offering a diagnosis. Against 1, he points out that Aristophanes popular play *the Clouds* presents Socrates as studying natural science, but this is inaccurate. No real Athenian would testify to Socrates really engaging in such an investigation. They need, he urges, to distinguish the fictional portrayals of him from his real views. Against 2, he claims that Athenians have misunderstood his motivation for examining supposed experts.

- 20cd: S puts into the mouths of the jurors: where there's smoke there's fire; you wouldn't have gained this reputation if you weren't up to something
- 20d: claims that he acquired this reputation as a result of a certain kind of wisdom, human wisdom.
- 21a: story of Chaerephon going to oracle
- 21c: description of his process: approach people to test if they are wise. He went to politicians, (21dc) poets (natural inspiration) and craftsmen.
 - But: S grants the craftsmen know many things about their crafts (22d); how?

- While he allows that they do have knowledge (of their craft), he complains that this led them to think they had knowledge elsewhere, on the more important matters, which they did not, which rendered the knowledge they had, on the whole, undesirable.
- 21d5: “it seems that I am wiser than he in just this one small way: that what I don’t know, I don’t think I know”
 1. S does not know anything about “physics”/natural philosophy (19c)
 2. S does not know how to make people “excellent” (= virtuous) (20c)
 3. S has (if anything) “human wisdom” = does not think he knows what he does not know (20–21d)

What is human wisdom?

It seems clear that the scope of [3] covers “the most important things”—seeming to mean moral or ethical truth; but, the meaning of his denial is controversial:

- 3a. S has no (ethical) knowledge *at all*; but, he does have (ethical) beliefs (if so, what does he take to be the status of those beliefs?)
- 3b. S has no technical or expert (ethical) knowledge, but does have non-technical knowledge.
- 3c. (modification of 3b?) S lacks systematic (ethical) understanding but does have some piece-meal knowledge.

At 29b, Socrates claims, “To act unjustly, on the other hand, to disobey someone better than oneself, whether god or man, that I do know (*oida*) to be bad and shameful.”

Defense against M’s Charges

Socrates cross-examined Meletus, his prosecutor. His intent is to undermine the explicit charges. He use a method called the “elenchus” (= “test,” “cross-examining”) to do so. X = alleged knower; P, Q, R, etc. = propositions

- S finds a claim that X asserts, P
 - E.G. S gets Meletus to assert that “Socrates corrupts the youth willingly”
- S gets X to assert other claims, Q, R, ...
 - Associating with bad people harms oneself

- No one harms oneself willingly
- Therefore: no one would harm one's associates willingly
- S gets X to conclude (from Q, R, ...), not-P
 - Therefore: Socrates does not corrupt the youth willingly
- S gets (or tries to get) X to conclude that he does not know whether P

The Good Life

S believes that the state of one's soul (*psuchê*) is of the utmost importance (29e, 30b). Is it the *only* thing that matters? Or just the most important? The translation of 30b3-5 is controversial. Here are two options:

1. "It's not from wealth that virtue comes, but from virtue comes money, and all the other things that are good for human beings, both in private and in public life." [Grube]
2. "It's not from wealth that virtue comes, but from virtue money and all the other things become good for human beings, both in private and in public life." [Alternative]

Our first option explicitly says that there are things other than virtue which are good to have, both in public and private. These include money, but likely include things like beauty, pleasure, etc. Our first option says that if you are virtuous, then you will likely achieve all the other good things in this life. The second option says that money, pleasure, etc., are not good for humans in of themselves. If you are not virtuous, money would not be a good thing to have. Rather, it is virtue alone that matters. This second interpretation is more likely the correct one.

An obvious challenge to Socrates' emphasis on virtue is that we might face situations where being virtuous will risk our lives. But Socrates argues that the fear of death should not lead people to act unjustly, impious, etc. He paints two possible pictures of what death is like, neither of which he thinks we should fear (40c–41c)

1. A dreamless sleep
2. Existence in Hades with other deceased people