Introduction

Socrates faces a number of charges:

1. He studies things in the heavens and below the earth...implicit charge.
2. He makes the worse argument into the stronger (better) argument....implicit charge.
3. He is guilty of corrupting the young...explicit charge.
4. He does not believe in the gods of the city...explicit charge.

The dialog is structured as follows:

- 17a–24b: S's defense against the implicit accusations.
- 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.

Our interest is twofold: his view of **wisdom** and his view of the **good life**.

Defense Against Implicit Accusation

In defending himself against the implicit accusations, S makes some radical claims about knowledge and wisdom. He begins by offering a diagnosis of the implicit accusations. 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 S 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: S 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 craftspeople.

  - 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'm 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?

S claims that he has human wisdom, but also that he lacks knowledge. This raises the difficult question about what S thinks human wisdom is. It's likely that S is drawing some distinction between knowledge and belief in his characterization of human wisdom. Here are some options:

Option 1: S is wise iff S believes he is not wise.

Option 1 includes a claim about what S believes about himself, namely, he believes he is not wise. The idea is that human wisdom involves insight into our own minds. As an analogy, John might love Sue without being aware that he loves Sue. Alternatively, he might believe that he loves Sue, but, in fact, does not; he is mistaken about his emotions. Just as we can be mistaken about our emotions, we can be mistaken about our beliefs and knowledge. I believe that I know the proof to Pythagoras' Theorem, but I could be mistaken that I have this knowledge. So, option 1 is suggesting that you are wise only if you believe that you are not wise. Problems for this option: (i) S believes that he is wise; he believes the oracle, and (ii) option 1 excludes the possibility that a person could have a true belief that they are not, in fact, wise.

Option 2: S is wise iff S believes S does not know anything.

But, (i) S doesn't claim that wisdom is incompatible with knowledge; presumably a person who only believes they know something when they do in fact know it would be a wise person. (ii) At 29b, S 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."

Option 3: S is wise iff for all P, S believes S knows P iff S knows P.

Option 3 claims that a wise person only believes they know what they really do know. If they don't know something, they don't believe they know it (which shows why the craftsperson is not wise). And if they do know something, then they believe they know it. Their beliefs about what they do and don't know are fully accurate. But does human wisdom concern all possible truths? It seems clear that "the most important things"that S recognizes he does not know include moral or ethical truth. So, perhaps this is S's view of human wisdom:

Option 4: S is wise iff for any moral or ethical truth P, S believes S knows P iff S knows P.

The Good Life

How should we live? S and the ancient Greeks understand this question as asking about the priorities that we should pursue in this life. S insists that we should not organize our lives around the pursuit of wealth, power, and pleasure. Aristotle will call the lives devoted to such things the money-making life, the political life, and the hedonistic life. There are different ways such lives could be pursued, e.g., the drug addict and foodie are both living hedonistic lives. Such lives were considered candidates for *eudaimonia*, which roughly translates as 'the life well lived', 'the happy life', 'the excellent life'. But S rejects these candidates for the good life:

> You are mistaken my friend, if you think that a man who is worth anything ought to spend his time weighing up the prospects of life and death. He has only one thing to consider in performing any action—that is, whether he is acting right or wrongly, like a good man or a bad one. (28b)

S here criticizes those who fear death. By 'good person' he means something like 'an excellent person', a person who is living an excellent life:

1. If a person is excellent, then they regard only one property of their actions as ultimately decisive (or important), whether they are right or wrong.
2. If a person is concerned with the risk of death, then it is not the case that they regard only one property of their action as ultimately important, whether they are right or wrong.
3. If a person is concerned with the risk of death, then the person is not an excellent person.

So, S believes that the way to live an excellent life concerns doing what is right or wrong. This is why he refuses to give up the practice of philosophy as a condition for his acquittal; he thinks it would be wrong to disobey the gods' command to examine fellow citizens. This is also why he refuses to leave Athens and live quietly in exile; it would be wrong to disobey the gods' injunction that

he test those who claim to know. But what does S mean by claiming that the best life concerns right and wrong actions?

Care for his own soul: Throughout his defense (20a-b, 24c-25c, 31b, 32d, 36c, 39d) S repeatedly stresses that a human being must care for their soul more than anything else.

Care for others' soul: S argues that the god gave him to the city as a gift and that his mission is to help improve the city. S characterizes himself as a gadfly and the city as a sluggish horse in need of stirring up (30e). Just as the gadfly is an irritant to the horse but rouses it to action, so S supposes that his purpose is to persuade his fellow citizens that the most important good for a human being was the health of the soul.

Soul harms: S thinks that false beliefs harm our souls, and so caring for our souls requires that we avoid false beliefs and only hold true beliefs.

Good souls

A good soul is a virtuous soul; virtue is that, whatever it is, that makes a soul a good one. Vice, on the other hand, is that, whatever it is, that makes a soul a bad one. But what exactly are these virtues and vices?

S thinks that a good soul is analogous to a healthy body. Benefiting a soul is analogous to promoting health in the body and harming the soul is analogous to harming the health of the body. But this doesn't quite tell us what exactly a healthy soul, a virtuous soul, is meant to be. There are various options:

Intellectualism: what it is to have a healthy soul just is to possess only true beliefs; what it is to have a unhealthy soul just is to have false beliefs.

Instrumentalism: true beliefs produce health in the soul and false beliefs undermine health in the soul. Here is one way that might happen:

- Appetites for pleasure, aversions to pain, and emotions, such as fear, anger, or love arise from our beliefs about what is good for us, e.g., if I believe that ice-cream is good for me, then I will desire ice-cream.
- When we act for the sake of such appetites, aversions, etc., they are strengthened and we become increasingly habituated to believing that we should act accordingly–the more I satisfy my desire for ice-cream, the more I believe that eating ice-cream is good for me.

On both interpretations, 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. S is claiming that without virtue, money, pleasure, and power would be harmful to us, by, for instance, posing a distorting effect on our ability to reason. But with virtue, we can discipline our desires for such things; virtue allows us desire such things appropriately without those desires enslaving us.

The Examined Life

After the conviction and sentencing, S tells the jury that he could never keep silent, because

> it's the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day, and the other things you've heard me discussing and examining myself and others about, on the grounds that the unexamined life isn't worth living for a human being (38a).

S claims that "the unexamined life is not worth living for human beings", and because of this he must discuss virtue and examine both himself and others. What does S mean by this famous claim? Why does he emphasize the life of human beings?