

We're All A Bit Sorry

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (September 2020)



The Death of Socrates, Jacques-Louis David, approx 1787

I am now the age at which Socrates was put to death. Alas, I have no Greek and therefore can read the *Apology*, the speech he made to the Athenian jury in his own defence (at least according to Plato), only in translation. I have to take it on trust that the translation that I use is more or less accurate, in so far as any translation can be accurate; at any rate, the one I use is more than sixty years old and still in print, so I presume that it has passed the scrutiny of classical scholars. One cannot forever be questioning one's

sources or mistrusting authority. The philosopher Karl Popper accused Wittgenstein of continually polishing his glasses without ever looking through them.

Although the death of Socrates—the execution, rather—took place nearly two and a half millennia ago, it retains its ability to shock and appal. No man, as described by Plato, ever deserved the death penalty less, at least in our eyes; and even if we accept that people thought differently from us at other times and places, it is worth remembering that the jury of 500 found Socrates guilty only by a comparatively slender majority, 265 to 235.

Socrates was accused of worshipping false gods of his own devising rather than the gods recognised by the state, and also of corrupting the youth of Athens. We are on his side from the beginning: we don't believe the state should prescribe gods to worship, and how could Socrates have corrupted youth when his method was merely to get them to think, rather than (as nowadays) indoctrinate them with supposedly indubitable truths? It wasn't as if Socrates were a degenerate rock musician . . .

Yet reading the *Apology*, one is not always entirely convinced by his arguments, some of which seem to me almost bad. For example, Socrates turns on his accuser, Meletus, and tries to show that he, Meletus, has no real interest in the proper rearing of youth, and therefore no standing to speak. Of course, a poor argument does not justify an execution: if it did, the world would soon be entirely depopulated. But because we want Socrates to obtain justice, we also want to believe that all his arguments are sound.

Meletus has accused Socrates of corrupting youth. During his trial, Socrates says that Meletus, who has agreed under his questioning that he wants youth to be exposed to the best influences possible, must know who has a good influence on youth. Meletus is unable to say, from which Socrates

implies that Meletus therefore has no right to accuse him, Socrates, of being a bad influence. We cannot know a bad influence unless we know a good one.

This, surely, is false, or at least unconvincing. I may say that I want all children to be taught to read as well as possible without myself knowing what the best method of teaching them is. Moreover, it would also be reasonable for me to say, though again I had no special knowledge of teaching, that children of normal intelligence who had attended school for twelve years but emerged unable to read with facility had been ill-taught. All that is necessary for me to be able to make such a judgment is the common knowledge that children of like intelligence (and perhaps background) have at some time been taught to read with facility, and that therefore such an accomplishment is possible.

It is surely also possible to say that Bluebeard was a bad influence on children without claiming to know how to bring up children oneself. This does not prove that Meletus was right, that Socrates actually was a bad influence. The onus, moreover, was on him to prove his allegation, at least if every man is to be deemed innocent until proven guilty. It is simply to say that Socrates did not prove by his argument that Meletus was wrong.

According to the *Apology*, however, Meletus did not protest and Socrates' sophistry went unanswered, unless the verdict of the jury be deemed an answer to Socrates' questioning.

Meletus, moreover, has accused Socrates of having *knowingly* corrupted youth. Against this accusation, Socrates offers the following argument:

Every person wants to live in a good society. A good society requires good people. To corrupt youth is to raise up bad people and therefore a bad society. Therefore,

Socrates could not have corrupted youth knowingly.

In other words, no man does wrong knowingly. If Socrates corrupted youth, it could not have been deliberate, for to have done so would be in contradiction of the first premise, that everyone wants to live in a good society; and if the corruption were not deliberate, then he could have committed no crime.

Again, this hardly convinces unless you believe that all bad behaviour is actually a form of ignorance or poor reasoning. On this account of the matter, evil would have no attractive power of its own, but this seems hardly in accord with human experience. Of course, you can make it true by definition, by claiming that if people knew their *true* interests, they would never behave badly, but such a truth by definition would be completely useless and without any possible empirical interest.

Again, Socrates has tried to dissolve away Meletus' accusation by mere sophistry, and once again there Meletus does not reply, either because he lacks the dialectical skill to make one, or because he had no right to do so, or because Plato wants to show Socrates in the best possible light. And needless to say, if Meletus had replied that it is simply not true that no man does wrong knowingly, and that Man has within him an attraction to evil as well as to good, it would only have refuted Socrates' argument, not proved that he, Socrates, had actually done any evil.

Socrates (as depicted by Plato) cannot quite make up his mind whether in morals he is a deontologist or a consequentialist, that is to say whether right conduct is a matter of following a principle or of weighing up the results of that conduct. He tells us that he refrains from politics because no man can do good or prevent harm thereby, and if he tries, he will lose his life pretty quickly; but he also says that it is not worth living if one simply minds one's own

business and fails to try to do right in order to save one's skin. Since in politics there is always a better and worse, merely to withdraw from it is to avoid the difficult for the sake of an abstract purity. But to indulge in politics is to get one's ethical hands dirty, as it were.

Socrates' implicit ambivalence about the matter is surely our own. On the one hand, the end does not justify the means; on the other, we should not say that the end *never* justifies the means: for example, we tell a lie to someone with Alzheimer's disease or to someone who is dying to avoid distressing him to no purpose. The danger is of Phariseeism at one extreme and complete scoundrelism at the other. The more distant and fantastical the end, the less can it justify means of doubtful morality: which is why Lenin was one of the worst men who ever lived. He made an impossible unattractive, and very distant end, the Marxist utopia, the justification for millions of capital crimes.

There is an argument in the *Apology* which seems to me not only weak but dangerous. Socrates argues that death is not to be feared as an evil:

I suppose that if anyone were told to pick out the night on which he slept so soundly as not even to dream, and then to compare it with all the other nights and days of his life, and then were told to say, after due consideration, how many better and happier days and nights than this he had spent in the course of his life—well, I think that the Great King himself, to say nothing of any private person, would find these days and nights easy to count in comparison with the rest. If death is like this, then, I call it gain, because the whole of time, if you look at it in this way, can be regarded as no more than one single night.

If this were a good argument, the whole of life could be considered a curse, and the sooner anyone is out of it the

better for him. To kill someone would therefore be a kindness, the earlier in his life the better, and every murderer could pose as a philanthropist. I count myself a pessimist, but I have never held quite so dismal a view as this of Man's sojourn on Earth. I could not help thinking also of the young people in Britain whom I have overheard extolling the wonderful pleasures of the night before because they had drunk so much that they could remember nothing about it. Total amnesia, then, is the best, or among the best that can be hoped for from social life. Not for nothing is one of the largest nightclubs on the island of Ibiza, Spain, which is a favoured destination of the European young, called *Amnesia*. What exactly is it that they wish to forget?

The analogy between what amounts to a good night's sleep and death seems to me not quite sufficient to establish the point that death is not merely little to be feared but actually desirable. The pleasure of a good night's sleep is surely predicated on subsequent wakefulness; it is not known to have been a pleasure unless one wakes once it is over, and unless one knows what it is like not to have had a good night's sleep. And again, if an eternal good night's sleep is the best that life can offer, no one does wrong by killing someone else. On the contrary.

At one point in the *Apology*, Socrates tries to convince the jurors that he is a gift of God to Athens because his behaviour is so unnatural.

If you doubt that I am really the sort of person who would have been sent to this city as a gift from God, you can convince yourselves . . . Does it seem natural that I should have neglected my own affairs and endured the humiliation of allowing my family to be neglected all these years, while I busied myself all the time on your behalf, going like a father or elder brother to see each one of you privately, and urging you to set your thoughts on goodness?

Surely enduring the humiliation of allowing my family to be neglected all these years' is a rather weaselly way of putting it? It makes it sound as if the person who most suffers from neglect of a family is the person who does the neglecting rather than the members of the family who experience the neglect. There is oily self-pity in these words, which is not at all admirable.

Perhaps Socrates is the first of a long series of intellectuals who have pursued their obsessions at the expense of the people supposedly closest to them. They feel responsibility for others in inverse proportion to their proximity. With the general bohemianisation of society, this has become almost a mass phenomenon. People now feel responsible for the planet but not for the person next door. They are worried about the environment, but not about the chewing-gum that people tread into the pavements of their streets.

Still, we mustn't be too hard on poor old Socrates (as portrayed by Plato). All that has happened since is not his fault. And it is astonishing that he dealt with philosophical problems that are still not resolved two and a half millennia later. If he was not entirely frank when he said that he did not seek to indoctrinate people, that he was merely a humble enquirer after truth, few of us could claim to be more frank than he about the nature or motivation of our activities. We are all necessarily children of Socrates/Plato, as we are all children of the Enlightenment, even if we have reservations about both Socrates and the Enlightenment.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [*The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd*](#) (with Kenneth Francis) and [*@NERIconoclast*](#)<