

# Plato, *Apology* 28d6-29a1 and the Epehebic Oath\*

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## 1.

After having done with the cross-examination of Meletus, Socrates turns to the jury with a hypothetical question:

Someone may perhaps say: 'Are you really not ashamed, Socrates, of having practised the kind of activity that puts your life now in danger?' I should answer him, and justly too, like this: 'Your suggestion is dishonourable, Sir, if you think a man who is the slightest use ought to take into account the risk of life or death, rather than to consider one thing alone in every action, whether the action is just or unjust, and the behaviour that of a good man or a bad'. (28b; tr. M.C. Stokes, with slight changes)

What follows is formally a digression; in fact, however, it has long been recognized as the central part of Socrates' first speech and the *Apology* as a whole (Burnet, 197; cf. Strycker-Slings, 132-3). It is here that Socrates explains in detail the divine mission to which his entire life has been dedicated; moreover, as Gabriel Danzig has recently argued, the purpose of this part of the dialogue is overtly apologetic, in that Plato replies to post-trial charges of Socrates' incompetence, arrogance and failure in court (Danzig, 311-13).

The illustration of the principle that duty is more important than life opens with a mythological example — Achilles' decision to avenge the death of Patroclus although he knows that this will cost him his life (*Ap.* 28b9-d5). The use of a mythological example was of course a common practice (cf. Stokes, 142) and, judging by its being adduced twice in the *Symposium*, the theme of Achilles' self-sacrifice was one of Plato's favourites (*Symp.* 179e, 208d). In the *Apology*, it leads to the following passage (28d6-29a1; for the Greek text see the Appendix):

For this indeed, Athenians, is the truth of the matter: wherever a man posts himself in the ranks, thinking that best, or is posted by a commander, there he ought, as it seems to me, to stand his ground in the face of danger, taking no account either of death or of anything else rather than of disgrace. Therefore I should have done a terrible thing, Athenians, if when posted by the commanders you chose to command me at Potidaea and at Amphipolis and on the field of Delium I then stood my ground where they posted me as firmly as anyone and risked being killed, but when posted by the god (as I imagined and supposed) with the obligation to live as a philosopher examining myself and others I then in fear of death or anything else deserted my post.

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In most extant literature on the dialogue, notably in the authoritative commentary by Strycker and Slings, this passage is regarded as nothing more than a particular application to Socrates' personal experience as a hoplite soldier of the general principle, laid down earlier, that duty is more important than life (cf. also Stokes 144-46). On this interpretation, the mythological example of Achilles' forfeiting his life would be the main illustration of the general principle in question. I will argue, however, that Socrates' words in *Ap.* 28d6-10 'wherever a man posts himself in the ranks, thinking that best, or is posted by a commander, there he ought, as it seems to me, to stand his ground in the face of danger, taking no account either of death or of anything else rather than of disgrace' are a paraphrase of what will later become firmly attested as the ephebic oath, and that the essentials of the latter are also deliberately evoked throughout the broader context of the passage. I will also argue that this hitherto uncommented point adds a new dimension to our understanding of Plato's rhetorical strategies in the dialogue.

## 2.

In his devastating review of O.W. Reinmuth's, *The Ephebic Inscriptions of the Fourth Century B.C.* (Brill, 1973), D.M. Lewis wrote: 'The epigraphical picture remains that we have no texts about ephebes certainly datable before 334/3' (Lewis, 254). The literary evidence, however, suggests a different picture. As a matter of fact, the existence of the ephebic oath even before the battle of Chaeronea and the Lycurgan period is well attested in our sources. The most important piece of evidence is undoubtedly Demosthenes 19.303 (*On the False Embassy*). When attacking Aeschines, Demosthenes claims that before having become a friend of Macedon the former had urged the Athenians to make war against Philip by quoting the decrees of Miltiades and Themistocles, as well as the ephebic oath:

[303] Who raised the cry that Philip was forming coalitions in Greece and Peloponnesus while you slept? Who made those long and eloquent speeches, and read the decrees of Miltiades and Themistocles and the oath which the ephebes take in the temple of Aglaurus? [304] Was it not Aeschines? (ὄυχ οὐτος;) (tr. C.A. and J. H. Vince, with slight changes).

Not only does the word 'ephebes' actually appear in the text: Demosthenes also refers to the temple of Aglaurus, where the young Athenians took the ephebic oath and whose deity is actually mentioned first in the list of the gods that concludes the oath (l. 17).

The date of the speech, 343 BCE, leaves no room for doubt that the ephebic oath was in existence in Athens at least ten years before the institution of Ephebeia is attested by the epigraphic evidence, and Demosthenes' reference to the quotation of the oath by Aeschines during the period when Philip was gaining control over the Greek states allows us to go back yet another decade. Moreover, as P. Siewert showed in an important article, several literary sources testify to the fact that something similar to the ephebic oath existed even as early as the fifth century (Siewert; cf. Burckhardt, 14, 58-62). Siewert refers to Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Thucydides (Siewert, 104-7; cf. Dillery, 469, n. 40); among the fourth-century authors, Xenophon, Aeschines, Demosthenes, and Aristotle have been mentioned by both Siewert and others (Siewert, 108-9 and n. 36; Dillery, 469-70, nn. 44 and 45).

Plato's *Apology* has never been associated with this list. However, none of the examples adduced by Siewert bears so striking a resemblance to ll. 6-8 of the epigraphic version of the oath (quoted in full in the Appendix) as Socrates' words οὐ ἄν τις ἑαυτὸν τάξει ἡγήσάμενος βέλτιστον εἶναι ἢ ὑπ' ἄρχοντος ταχθῆ, ἐνταῦθα δεῖ, ὡς ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ, μένοντα κινδυνεύειν ('wherever a man posts himself in the ranks, thinking that best, or is posted by a commander, there he ought, as it seems to me, to stand his ground in the face of danger'). Compare the following clause of the oath: Οὐκ αἰσχυνῶ τὰ ἱερὰ ὄπλα οὐδὲ λείψω τὸν παραστάτην ὅπου ἂν στ<ο>ιχήσω ('I will not disgrace these sacred arms, and I will not desert the comrade beside me wherever I shall be stationed in a battle line'; tr. J. Plescia in Siewert). It can be seen that there is an exact semantic correspondence between the two phrases; the parallelism between the indefinite clauses οὐ ἄν τις ἑαυτὸν τάξει ... ταχθῆ of Socrates' speech and ὅπου ἂν στοιχήσω of the oath is especially noteworthy.<sup>1</sup>

The broader context of the two passages points in the same direction. Thus, both texts mention the disgrace (τὸ αἰσχρόν *Ap.* 28d10; οὐκ αἰσχυνῶ l. 6) involved in abandoning the battle line; see again 'I will not disgrace these sacred arms' of the oath and 'taking no account either of death or of anything else rather than of disgrace' of Socrates' speech. Compare also Socrates' description of his activities which follows our passage almost immediately:

... and so long as I am alive and capable I will not stop doing philosophy and advising you and showing any one of you I meet on any occasion, in my usual words, this: 'You best of men, as an Athenian, belonging to the greatest and most famous city for wisdom and strength, aren't you ashamed of concerning yourself with the acquisition of as much money as possible, and reputation and honours, but not concerning yourself with or devoting thought to prudence and truth and the best possible condition in future of your soul?...' I will do this to both younger and older, whoever I may meet, both foreigner and citizen, but more to my fellow-citizens – more by as much as you are closer to me in kinship. For these are the god's orders, you must know. I think you have never in the past had a greater good for you in the city than my service of the god (29d-30a).

Socrates' claim of patriotic motives for his activity evokes ll. 9-11 of the epigraphic version of the oath: 'and I will not hand over [to the descendants] the fatherland smaller, but greater and better, so far as I am able, by myself or with the help of all' (κατὰ τε ἑμαυτὸν καὶ μετὰ ἀπάντων).<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, must have evoked the next clause, 'I will honour the traditional sacred institutions' (καὶ τιμήσω ἱερὰ τὰ πάτρια, l. 16). Religious piety was not only directly relevant to the charges brought against Socrates; it was at the same time an inseparable part of the 'hoplite-patriot-pious man' ideal of the Athenian

<sup>1</sup> It goes without saying that, rather than being rooted in actual battle experience of the hoplite soldier, the clause οὐ ἄν τις ἑαυτὸν τάξει is a deliberate adaptation of this experience (expressed in full in the clause ἢ ὑπ' ἄρχοντος ταχθῆ) to the Socratic ideal of philosophical life.

<sup>2</sup> According to the suggestion made by an anonymous referee, the sentiment expressed in this phrase, and especially in the words κατὰ τε ἑμαυτὸν (appearing twice in the oath, see also l. 15), may also be reflected in *Crito*, where the laws accuse a hypothetically fleeing Socrates of attempting to destroy the city, τὸ σὸν μέρος (50b2; 54c8). On *Crito* see also below, section 3.

ephebic oath in such a way as to adapt it to a more general context had nothing unusual about it. If my argument is correct, *Ap.* 28d6-29a1 belongs to the same category.

That *Ap.* 28d6-29a1 is not just an *ad hoc* amplification of Socrates' reference to his personal military record may be further corroborated by comparison with *Crito*. Socrates draws an imaginary picture of what the laws of Athens would have said to him had he contemplated an escape from prison and from imminent death:

Do you not realize that you are even more bound to respect and placate the anger of your country than your father's anger? That if you cannot persuade your country you must do whatever it orders (ποιεῖν ἃ ἂν κελεύη), and patiently submit to anything that it imposes (πάσχειν ἕάν τι προστάτῃ παθεῖν), whether it be flogging or imprisonment? And if it leads you out to war, to be wounded or killed, you must comply, and it is right that you should do so. You must not give way or retreat or desert your post (οὐδὲ λειπτέον τὴν τάξις). Both in war and in the law courts and everywhere else you must do whatever your city and your country command (ποιητέον ἃ ἂν κελεύῃ ἡ πόλις καὶ ἡ πατρίς) . . . . (51b-c; tr. H. Tredennick, with slight changes).

Although neither Amphipolis nor Potidaea nor Delion are mentioned in this passage, the main thesis 'you should do whatever the city authorities command you to do and should under no circumstances desert your post' is the same as in the *Apology*. The similarity of locution between the *Crito* passage and *Ap.* 28d6-29a1 supports the theory that Plato's *Apology* was intended above all as a contribution to the post-trial debate concerning Socrates' behaviour in the court (see esp. Danzig, 311-13). That is to say, in both the *Apology* and the *Crito* Socrates emerges as a man of duty, a paradigmatic hoplite soldier, as it were, who would rather die than desert his post.

If I am correct in suggesting that *Ap.* 28d6-10 is a paraphrase of the ephebic oath, this will not only provide additional evidence concerning the existence of the oath well before 334/3 BCE,<sup>7</sup> but will also throw new and different light on this part of the dialogue. Rather than simply making a reference to Socrates' military experience at Amphipolis, Delion, and Potidaea, Plato's association of Socrates' obedience to his god with the behaviour of the hoplite soldier should be seen as a sophisticated rhetorical move meant to reach the central core of the Athenian consensus.

<sup>7</sup> Burckhardt, 59 and n. 160, suggests an intriguing possibility that some form of the oath was transmitted orally since earliest times.

## APPENDIX

1. Pl. *Apol.* 28d6-29a1

Οὕτω γὰρ ἔχει. ὦ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, τῇ ἀληθείᾳ· οὐ ἂν τις ἑαυτὸν τάξῃ ἡγησάμενος βέλτιστον εἶναι ἢ ὑπ' ἄρχοντος ταχθῆ, ἐνταῦθα δεῖ, ὡς ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ, μένοντα κινδυνεύειν, μηδὲν ὑπολογιζόμενον μήτε θάνατον μήτε ἄλλο μηδὲν πρὸ τοῦ αἰσχροῦ. ἐγὼ οὖν δεινὰ ἂν εἶην εἰργασμένος, ὦ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, εἰ ὅτε μὲν με οἱ ἄρχοντες ἔταπτον, οὓς ὑμεῖς εἴλεσθε ἄρχειν μου, καὶ ἐν Ποτειδαίᾳ καὶ ἐν Ἀμφιπόλει καὶ ἐπὶ Δηλίῳ, τότε μὲν οὐ ἐκείνοι ἔταπτον ἔμενον ὥσπερ καὶ ἄλλος τις καὶ ἐκινδύνευον ἀποθανεῖν, τοῦ δὲ θεοῦ τάπτοντος, ὡς ἐγὼ ᾤθηθην τε καὶ ὑπέλαβον, φιλοσοφοῦντά με δεῖν ζῆν καὶ ἐξετάζοντα ἑμαυτὸν καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους, ἐνταῦθα δὲ φοβηθεῖς ἢ θάνατον ἢ ἀλλ' ὅτιοῦν πράγμα λίποιμι τὴν τάξιν.

## 2. The epigraphic version of the ephobic oath (after Siewert).

- 6 (I) Οὐκ αἰσχυρῶ τὰ ἱερά ὄπ-  
λα (II) οὐδὲ λείψω τὸν παραστάτην ὅπου ἂν σ-  
τ<σ>ο>λχῆσω· (III) ἀμυνῶ δὲ καὶ ὑπὲρ ἱερῶν καὶ ὄσ-  
ίων (IV) καὶ ο<σ>κ ἐλάττω παραδώσω τὴν πατρίδα-  
10 α, πλείω δὲ καὶ ἀρείω κατὰ τε ἑμαυτὸν κα-  
ὶ μετὰ ἀπάντων· (V) καὶ εὐηκοήσω τῶν ἀεὶ κρ-  
αυόντων ἐμφρόνως καὶ τῶν θεσμῶν τῶν  
ἰδρυμένων καὶ οὓς ἂν τὸ λοιπὸν ἰδρῶσω-  
νται ἐμφρόνως· (VI) εἰ δέ τις ἀναιρεῖ, οὐκ ἐ-  
15 πιτρέψω κατὰ τε ἑμαυτὸν καὶ μετὰ πάντ-  
ων, καὶ τιμήσω ἱερά τὰ πάτρια. Ἰστορες [ο]  
θεοὶ Ἄγλαυρος, Ἔστια, Ἐνυώ, Ἐνυάλιος Ἄρ-  
της καὶ Ἀθηνᾶ Ἀρεία, Ζεὺς, Θαλλῶ, Αὐξώ, Ἥγε-  
μόνη, Ἥρακλῆς, ὅροι τῆς πατρίδος πυροί,  
κριθαί, ἄμπελοι, ἐλάαι, συκαί.>

## ABBREVIATIONS

- Burckhardt: L.A. Burckhardt, *Bürger und Soldaten, Aspekte der politischen und militärischen Rolle athenischer Bürger im Kriegswesen des 4. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.*, (Historia Einzelschriften, 101), Stuttgart, 1996.
- Burnet: Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates and Crito*, Edited with notes by J. Burnet, Oxford, 1924.
- Danzig: G. Danzig, 'Apologizing for Socrates: Plato and Xenophon on Socrates' Behavior in Court', *TAPA* 133 (2003), 281-321.
- Dillery: J. Dillery, 'Ephobes in the Stadium (not the Theatre): *Ath. Pol.* 42.4 and *IG II<sup>2</sup> 351*', *CQ* 52 (2002), 462-70.
- Lewis: D.M. Lewis, 'Attic Ephobic Inscriptions: A Review of O.W. Reinmuth, *The Ephobic Inscriptions of the Fourth Century B.C.*, Leiden 1971', *CR* 23 (1973), 254-56.
- Siewert: P. Siewert, 'The Ephobic Oath in Fifth-Century Athens', *JHS* 97 (1977), 102-11.
- Stokes: Plato, *Apology*, With an Introduction, Translation and Commentary by M.C. Stokes, Warminster, 1997.

Strycker-Slings: *Plato's Apology of Socrates, A Literary and Philosophical Study with a Running Commentary*, Edited and completed from the papers of the late E. de Strycker, by S.R. Slings, Leiden 1994.

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