

Interpretation

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Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

C.D.C. Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology: An Essay on Plato's Apology of Socrates* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989), xv + 207 pp., \$29.50, \$12.95 paper.

PATRICK COBY
Smith College

Reeve states in his Introduction that the *Apology* is a place where characteristic paradoxes about the person of Socrates can be profitably explored. He considers six such paradoxes: (1) Socrates as an elenctic philosopher and the problem of using refutation to convince someone to care for his soul; (2) Socrates' claim to ignorance coupled with affirmations of things known; (3) the dependence of virtue on knowledge and the puzzle of an ignorant and yet virtuous Socrates; (4) Socrates' denial that he is a teacher contrasted with the judgment of history that he is the paradigmatic teacher; (5) Socrates' anti-democratic politics and his personal interest in conversing with members of the demos; and (6) the compatibility of Socrates' famed irony with his gadfly's mission to improve the souls of others and the imperative of mounting a sensible defense.

Also in the Introduction Reeve supplies quick solutions to each of the dilemmas noted: (1) The Socratic elenchus results in psychic caring by disabusing people of the conceit of knowledge; it is service to the god Apollo who wants human beings to recognize their limitations. (2) Socrates has many superior opinions informed by elenctic examination, but he lacks "craft-knowledge" of virtue and of politics. (3) Socrates does not claim that he is virtuous, only that he is never voluntarily vicious. (4) Socrates does not teach in the sense of imparting knowledge to students; rather, midwife-fashion, he extracts ideas already present. (5) The examination of one's opinions is the essence of a life well led; since everyone should examine himself, everyone is equal, and Socrates, by promoting the examined life, is a democrat. (6) Socrates is not ironic because his disclaimers are all true and his defense is strategically sound.

Some of Reeve's solutions are scholarly commonplaces (e.g., the explanation of Socratic teaching); some are not (e.g., the discovery that Socrates is democratic). The final product is a thesis partially supported by the scholarship and partially peculiar to its author: namely, that Socrates says what he means and means what he says, that he is sincerely interested in demonstrating his innocence of the legal charges, and that he is a pious follower of Apollo (albeit an elenctic philosopher) and acts in a manner consistent with his religious duty. The key then to Reeve's interpretation is the belief that Socrates is a literalist

and not an ironist and that his actions, both at the trial and before, are directed by a god.

In my judgment Reeve is unable to establish any of these points. He begins with the proem, reading it so as to show that Socrates is not ironic and that he is not out to condemn himself. The fact that Socrates denies having knowledge of forensic rhetoric, says Reeve citing Hackforth, means only that he has never before used it, not that he has never before heard it (p. 6). Reeve notes that Socrates admits to having heard the rhetoric many times before (35a4–7); he even accepts the judgment that Socrates is using the rhetoric now (pp. 7–8). Maybe so. But then Socrates is not the foreigner he claims to be when asking the jury to make allowances for his ignorance (17d2–18a2). For Socrates to say that he is a foreigner when he is not, and for him to say it to an audience alerted to his cleverness, is irony in the first case and sabotage in the second.

Reeve argues, rightly I believe, that Socrates' "foreign dialect" refers to the elenchus (cross-examination) and not to the street talk of the vulgar populace. Socrates knows that the elenchus is part of the cause of the prejudice against him (20c–24a), and he mentions in the proem that the use of it will quite likely provoke the jury (17c7–d1). Why then does he employ cross-examination against Meletus, unless it be that he does not purpose an acquittal? Moreover, Socrates boasts that he will prove his accusers wrong in calling him a clever speaker (17b1–3). Now the measure of clever speech before a jury in a capital trial is not that posterity judge it a masterpiece of rhetoric, as Reeve seems to think (p. 5), but that it succeed in winning an acquittal. Thus the one sure way that Socrates can make good his boast, prove himself unclever and his accusers liars, is not to win an acquittal "by what [he] do[es]" (*ergōi*; 17b2).

Reeve charges Socrates with failure to reflect upon the possibility that "the elenchus might be a technique capable of making the weaker argument the stronger" (p. 165). It is "the unexamined part of his so thoroughly examined life," complains Reeve. But Reeve is mistaken about this. Early in his defense speech Socrates strays from the official indictment to charge himself with three offenses: natural science, or "investigating the things under the earth and the heavenly things"; sophistic rhetoric, or "making the weaker speech the stronger"; and "teaching others these same things" (19b5–c1). Because Socrates responds to only two of the three charges (the first and the third), Reeve supposes that there are only two charges, or that the first and the second charges are regarded by Socrates as one—as the combined subject matter of his putative teaching which he denies even knowing. In point of fact (and as noted by others), Socrates' disclaimer applies only to natural science. He offers no defense against the second charge of sophistic rhetoric. By leaving unanswered a charge which he alone brings up, Socrates, it seems fair to say, is being ironic. He resorts to irony because he knows full well that in cross-examining others he is sometimes guilty of making the weaker speech the stronger. Indeed, when he cross-examines Meletus, he gives the jury a threefold demon-

stration of how it is done. To take just one example, Socrates' "proof" that he believes in gods and is not an atheist is that he believes in daimons, the children of gods; since there cannot be children without parents, there cannot be daimons without gods—so the argument goes. But then Socrates likens a daimon to a mule, perhaps the only animal whose parents (a horse and an ass) are not inferable from the offspring (although the Greek word for "mule" means "half-ass"). Reeve, of course, disputes that there is anything amiss in Socrates' interrogation of Meletus. Having opted for the literalist interpretation, he is obliged not only to impute obtuseness to Socrates (his belief that the elenchus is morally unproblematic), but to find sense in nonsense.

On the question of Socrates' piety, Reeve must wrestle with the fact that Socrates sets out to "refute" the oracle. Reeve's answer is at first convincing, that Socrates, by questioning those reputed wise, intends only to determine the oracle's meaning, not to refute it as such. But Reeve quotes Herodotus about Croesus to the effect that when a person is presented with an enigmatic prediction, the proper course is to inquire a second time. Socrates makes no second inquiry. After a long period of thought and with great reluctance (21b7–9)—as if his original belief in divine veracity is losing its hold—he undertakes to prove the oracle wrong. And when he imagines himself confronting the oracle with the results of his investigation, he is described not as a suppliant seeking clarification, as Reeve contends (p. 23), but as an antagonist accusing the god of error (21c1–2).

A far more important point, however, is the claim that Socrates is a servant of Apollo. Socrates of course says that he is, at least that he serves the god; but for one simple reason he cannot be taken at his word—again, irony must be granted him. Socrates interprets the oracle to mean that that man is wisest who like himself understands that he is "worth nothing with respect to wisdom" (23b3–4). Reeve offers some pertinent remarks about Apollo, who as the god of limitation would quite appropriately deliver this deflationary, antihubristic message. But Reeve fails to notice that Socrates attributes to the god the preceding judgment that "human wisdom is worth little or nothing" (23a7). It is human wisdom which Socrates claims to possess (20d8–9). He has acquired it by leading an examined life (he has thus *made* the oracle true). He asserts that an examined life is the only life worth living (38a5–6). He may agree with the god that human beings are "worth nothing with respect to wisdom" and that intellectual moderation becomes them. He does not agree, however, that the pursuit of wisdom—called human wisdom, the examined life, or philosophy—is also worth nothing. If Socrates was ever a disciple of Apollo, his life as a philosopher has caused him to sever the tie.

It cannot be said that Reeve is unaware of alterations in Socrates' service to the god, for he devotes a later chapter to the rational foundations of Socrates' chosen life: "On the one hand, Socrates has a religious reason to live the examined life: the god has ordered him to do it (29b6–7). On the other hand, he has

a prudential reason to live the examined life: it is the best life for a human being, and a person must do what he thinks best, even at the risk of death (28d6–10)” (p. 71). Reeve concludes that both reasons “explain why Socrates leads the examined life. But only his religious reason explains why he is an Apollonian missionary” (p. 72)—meaning that Socrates exhorts his fellow citizens to care for their souls by examining their opinions about virtue. The assumption is that Apollo wants human beings to become philosophical. But the opposite is closer to the truth. Socrates conjectures that the god ordered him “to live philosophizing and examining [him]self and others” (28e5–6), just as Athenian generals stationed him at Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium. Philosophical conversation is a life-threatening duty, the purpose of which is to overcome one’s fear of death by recognizing that one does not know death to be a fearful thing. Admittedly, there is here some endorsement of human wisdom on the part of the god. But the emphasis is upon death-defying deeds as evidence of self-knowledge. Full compliance would require that Socrates go public with his “teaching,” that he use political office as a means of courting his destruction. But when such a possibility is raised (hypothetically), Socrates brings forth his daimon and reports that it warns him to be cautious and private in order better to preserve himself (31c–32a). The daimon contradicts and overrules the god who is somewhat careless of Socrates and who seems to have little interest in philosophy as a process or a progression toward wisdom. Philosophy, rather, is skeptical humility with fearless obedience to one’s superiors as its main result. As the god of limitation (Reeve’s point), Apollo defends the divine against intrusions by the human. Apollo, it seems almost true to say, is against philosophy and means to waste Socrates, whereas the daimon provides the prudent self-regard needed for philosophy and is Socrates’ protector.

Unless one has been persuaded by Reeve that Socrates speaks only the literal truth, that he aims for an acquittal, and that he is a devotee of Apollo, it is difficult to feel that Reeve’s fascinating argumentation is ever entirely on the mark. Some readers, no doubt, will be persuaded, for the book is intelligent, scholarly, and well written. And those who are may also find helpful Reeve’s technique of extracting a proposition from each section of the *Apology* for comparison with similar propositions in other dialogues. A case in point is Socrates’ contention that “it is virtue that makes wealth . . . good for a man” (usually translated as “Not from money does virtue come, but from virtue comes money” [30b2–4])—a statement which is the occasion for a twenty-page excursus on knowledge, virtue, and happiness. Because Reeve gives so much space to matters outside the *Apology*, much of the dialogue’s detail and richness go unremarked. This, too, is regrettable.