The Trial of Socrates

Background

The year is 399 BC. It is five years after the end of the war with Sparta. Life has not been good for the Athenians. After the war, Sparta put the Thirty Tyrants in charge of Athens. This was an oligarchy of thirty people that limited many of the rights and freedoms of the Athenian people.

Athenians eventually overthrew the Thirty Tyrants and took back their city in 403 BC and democracy was restored. But after the war, Athens was only a shadow of its former greatness. Some of the citizens now feel uneasy about the new, less important place of Athens in the Greek world. While others have become very critical of the democracy that led to their ruin.

One of the loudest critics of Athenian society is a man named Socrates. Socrates is called a “gadfly” by some. This is because, in the same way that a real gadfly stings a horse into moving fast, Socrates tries to use difficult questions to sting Athenian society into making important changes.

Not everyone appreciates the words of Socrates. He has just been put on trial for corrupting the youth of Athens and of not worshipping the Athenian gods.

Your Task

You are one of the dikasts, the 500 Athenian citizens who were chosen to serve as the jury for Socrates. The trial is concluded, and Socrates has been found guilty. There will be another vote to decide what his punishment will be. A lot of people are talking about giving him the death penalty. Other people don’t think that he should get the death penalty.

Your task is to read the opinions of other people about the punishment Socrates should receive. You will then take a position of your own. Later, you will write an argument to convince the other dikasts to vote with you.

Vocabulary:

**Oligarchy**: A government run by a few powerful and rich men. Athens was an oligarchy under the reign of the Thirty Tyrants.

**Democracy**: A system of government in which citizens have a say in the important decisions that affect everyone.

**Corrupting**: Putting ideas that others do not like into someone’s head.

**Dikasts**: The 500 Athenian citizens who were chosen to serve as the jury for Socrates.
Inquiry Question: Should Socrates get the death penalty?

Perspectives on Socrates

1. Odys (Soldier)

“Socrates is an Athenian citizen. He fought with us in the war against Sparta. He has earned his right to speak in our society.

As a soldier, I am not afraid to hear what anybody has to say. Let him ask as many questions as he wants to. What kind of a democracy will we have if we only let people speak when they agree with us?

Think about this: You want to get up and speak in front of the rest of the dikasts? What if somebody doesn’t like what you have to say? You could be the next one on trial. Socrates has committed no crimes. I think he should be set free.”

2. Helena (Wife and Mother)

“I think Socrates is the most irritating man I have ever met, but I am against the death penalty for moral reasons and I don’t think it is appropriate to give it to Socrates.

Odys says that Socrates has committed no crimes. That is not true! Socrates has already been found guilty of corrupting the youth of the city. The only question now is what his punishment should be.

I would be the first person to say that Socrates is an annoyance, and that Athens would be better off without him. Calling himself the wisest man in Athens is the most arrogant thing I ever heard.

But we already have a way of dealing with people like that. I think Socrates should be ostracized. Let him live outside of Athenian society for ten years and then see if he learns to behave himself. There is no need to give him the death penalty when ostracism is a perfectly good option.”

3. Agi (Poor Worker)

“We must give Socrates the death penalty, and the sooner the better!

Have you ever spoken with Socrates? He keeps asking you questions until he tricks you into saying something foolish. He’s so annoying!

Helena says that we should ostracize him instead. My friends, I want to tell you that this would be a terrible mistake. Socrates is as stubborn as a mule, and ostracism will only make him worse. If we send him away, we will only have to deal with the same issue all over again in ten years.

Also, putting Socrates to death would stop his students from following in his footsteps. It is not natural the way they follow him around. Now, a lot of them are starting to pick up some of his annoying habits. Enough is enough! Give Socrates the death penalty for the good of Athens!”
4. Hector (Foreign-born Merchant)

“I think Socrates is harmless. Everyone is making a big deal out of nothing. Sometimes he has ideas that really make you think, but most of the time, I think he is funny. Let me tell you a story about Socrates.

The Oracle of Apollo said that Socrates was the wisest man in all of Athens. Socrates said that this was not true, because he said he didn’t know anything. But later he realized that none of us know anything, but he was the only one who was wise enough to realize it! You see? He’s just a silly man who says ridiculous things.

Agi says that Socrates should get the death penalty because it will serve as an example to his students. But I think that is not a good enough reason. Agi is overreacting. Ignore Socrates, and he’ll go away. I know I don’t get to vote, but if I could, I’d vote to just let him go with a warning.”

5. Spiro (Farmer)

“I don’t like the idea of putting a man to death, but in the case of Socrates, I don’t think we have any other choice.

Socrates was the teacher of Critias, who was one of the leaders of the Thirty Tyrants from Sparta who ruled Athens after the war. The Thirty Tyrants took away our rights and made life miserable for us Athenians.

Hector thinks that Socrates is harmless. Does Hector not remember what life was like under the Thirty Tyrants? Perhaps he would like to go back to that time, since he likes Socrates so much.

We cannot allow Socrates to live because he has had too many connections with the enemies of Athens. He must be put to death, to keep the rest of us safe. “

6. Plato (Student of Socrates)

“I am one of the youths that Socrates is accused of corrupting. Did Socrates corrupt me? I say No! Socrates has taught me things that have expanded my mind and my understanding of the world.

He teaches publically for free. All he ever wanted to do was to search for wisdom, and encourage others to do the same.

Spiro accuses him of collaborating with the Thirty Tyrants because Critias was a student of his. But is Socrates responsible for each and every one of his students in all of their actions for the rest of their lives? Socrates had nothing to do with the Thirty Tyrants, and Spiro knows it!

In fact, Socrates committed no crimes at all. They only put him on trial because they don’t like him. That’s wrong!”
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