## Chapter 1

# The Context of Socrates' Defense of Philosophy

We cannot hope to understand Socrates' defense of the philosophic life in the *Phaedo* unless we understand the audience to which that defense is addressed. Only by discerning the distinctive character of his interlocutors and of their doubts about the philosophic life can we discern the distinctive character of the defense which Socrates presents to them. Only by seeing and feeling for ourselves the strength of their doubts can we determine how or whether Socrates answers those doubts.

We know from the other dialogues of Plato and from the Socratic works of Xenophon that the men who were with Socrates on the day of his death were among his most devoted followers.[1] We also know that a number of them went on to become founders of important schools of philosophy and authors of philosophic works.[2] But even though they have been persuaded by Socrates' speeches and moved by his example to live, or to try to live, the philosophic life, on the day of his death, they cannot help but wonder about the wisdom and goodness of that way of life (see 62c9–63b3). In order to understand the reason for their doubts, we must attempt to put ourselves in their shoes, to imagine ourselves in their world, and to see through their eyes the significance of the impending execution of Socrates.

## *I. The Persecution of the Philosophers*

The execution of Socrates signifies more to these men than the loss of a teacher and a friend. For the conviction and condemnation of Socrates is part of a persistent pattern of persecution of philosophers in the Greek cities of their time, a pattern that has emerged most ominously in the most civilized of those cities, Athens. This hostility to philosophers renders the philosophic pursuit of wisdom an extremely dangerous activity. Since these companions of Socrates are devoted to philosophy, the execution of their companion must remind them that they, too, may be persecuted if they persist in their devotion (see 64a10–b6). In this way, the execution of Socrates must lead them to wonder whether, given the threat of persecution, the life devoted to the rational pursuit of wisdom is itself a wise or good way of life.



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The conviction and subsequent execution of Socrates by Athens was not the only instance of a Greek city persecuting a philosopher.[3] Soon after the emergence of philosophy in Greece, philosophers began to suffer from the hostility of the politically powerful. Pythagoras and his followers had formidable enemies in Sicily. A large number of Pythagoreans were slain there, and, according to one account, Pythagoras himself was killed while fleeing from an angry mob.[4] Xenophanes was expelled from his native city, Colophon. And Zeno was put to death for plotting to overthrow the tyrant of Elea.[5]

But of greater importance than these instances was the plight of philosophers in Athens, the self-proclaimed school of Greece and the Greek city most open to philosophy.[6] Anaxagoras was the first philosopher to take up residence in Athens. There he became the adviser and friend of Pericles. But his friendship with Pericles did not prevent him from being imprisoned. He barely won release from prison and fled from the city.[7] Damon, a sophist and an associate of Pericles and Socrates, was ostracized.[8] Protagoras was expelled from Athens, and his books were burned in the agora.[9] The philosopher Diagoras was condemned to death and fled from Athens. The Athenians then announced that a talent of silver would be awarded to the man who killed him.[10] And Socrates himself was condemned to death and executed.

Philosophers and their associates, then, were frequently victims of severe persecution in Athens. It is true that philosophers appear to have been drawn to Athens by her reputation for openness. Other cities were also hostile to philosophy.[11] And Parmenides, Zeno, and Democritus appear to have passed through Athens without being harassed.[12] Nevertheless, the number and the prominence of the philosophers who were persecuted indicates that, by the end of the fifth century B.C., a clear pattern of persecution of philosophers by Athens had emerged.[13]

Nor did this hostility to philosophers abate soon after the execution of Socrates. Plato and his companions fled from Athens shortly after that execution. Aristotle later had to steal away from Athens for fear of imprisonment. Fifty years after Socrates' death, his execution was publicly cited with approval. And, at about the same time, Isocrates thought it necessary to make a defense of philosophy in response to the Athenians' strong opposition to it.[14] The Athenians' hostility to philosophy, then, was neither evanescent nor superficial but persistent and deep-seated.

### *II. The Philosophers and the Impiety Charge*

But what was the cause of this hostility? Although the reasons varied from case to case, the principal cause of the hostility to the philosophers

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was the widely held opinion that they were impious. Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Diagoras, Socrates, and Aristotle were all accused and convicted of impiety.[15] In the *Apology* Socrates states that the standard charge against philosophers is atheism, and Plato has the Athenian Stranger repeat and elaborate on this statement in the *Laws*.[16] In the eyes of the people, their leaders, and their poets, the philosophers were atheists, and they corrupted the youth by turning them into atheists as well.[17]

The charge of impiety was an extremely grave charge in the cities of ancient Greece.[18] Religion was at the heart of family and political life in the ancient city. The Greeks claimed to derive their moral codes and their laws from the gods. To call into question the existence of the gods was tantamount to undermining the most fundamental moral beliefs and the legitimacy of the city's laws.[19] Accordingly, the Greeks took their piety most seriously. The Athenians, for example, showed themselves willing on a number of occasions to sacrifice political and military advantage for religious reasons. They attempted to arrest their outstanding general, Alcibiades, and then condemned him to death in absentia at a crucial moment in the Peloponnesian War because he had allegedly mocked his city's religion.[20] The general Nicias chose to risk the destruction of the Athenian army in Sicily rather than refuse to heed what he and most of the Athenians took to be a sign from the gods.[21] Finally, the Athenians put to death the admirals who had just led them to one of their city's greatest naval victories because they had chosen not to gather the bodies of the dead Athenian sailors—as required by religious custom—during a dangerous storm after their victory.[22] The Athenians were willing to court military disaster and to execute victorious generals in order to fulfill their religious duties.[23] They believed that to leave impiety unpunished was to commit impiety and thereby to provoke the anger of the gods.[24] Those who did not believe in their gods and who taught others not to believe in them were, then, peculiarly dangerous criminals and were to be treated accordingly.

But what was the basis of the charge that the philosophers were impious? Plutarch, in a key passage of his life of Nicias (23), sheds light on this important question:

> But just as all these things were ready [for the Athenian forces' retreat from Syracuse] and none of the enemy was on the watch, since they did not expect it, there was an eclipse of the moon by night, and a great fear entered Nicias and those of the rest who, because of their inexperience or superstition, were struck with terror at such things. For that the darkening of the sun at the end of the month was somehow caused by the moon was already understood even by the many. But what it was that the moon encountered and how, being full, she should suddenly lose her light and

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> emit all sorts of colors, this was not easy to grasp, but they believed it strange and a sign from a god in advance of certain great misfortunes. For the first man to set down in writing the clearest and boldest argument of all about the shining and shadowing of the moon was Anaxagoras. And neither was he ancient nor was the argument reputable, but it was still secret and proceeded among a few and with a certain caution or trust. For they [the many] did not abide the natural philosophers and the praters about the heavens, as they were called at that time, because they reduced the divine to unreasoning causes, improvident powers, and necessary properties. But even Protagoras went into exile, the imprisoned Anaxagoras was barely saved by Pericles, and Socrates, who did not concern himself with any of such things,[25] nevertheless died on account of philosophy. But later the reputation of Plato shone forth, on account of the life of the man and because he placed the natural necessities under the divine and more authoritative principles, and took away the slander against these arguments and gave a path to these studies to all men. At any rate, his companion Dion, although there was an eclipse of the moon at the time when he was about to set sail out of Zacynthe against Dionysius, was not at all disturbed but put to sea, and landing at Syracuse he expelled the tyrant.

Plutarch explains that the many were hostile to philosophers because they reduced what the many thought divine—the gods who cared for human beings and who were free to reward and punish them—to unreasoning causes, improvident powers, and necessary properties. In the eyes of the many, the philosophers reduced the divine to the natural, the religious to the scientific. The philosophers taught that eclipses are not signs of the gods' righteous anger but predictable natural phenomena. They showed that thunder and lightning are not divine punishments of the wicked but forces of uncaring nature. The philosophers revealed a universe that is deaf to man's demand for cosmic justice.[26] These discoveries shattered the Greeks' vision of a universe that supported and enforced their laws and their moral codes. The philosophers demystified the world, and this demystification threatened to delegitimize and demoralize the ancient city. By challenging, in particular, the belief in gods who reward the just and punish the unjust, the philosophers threatened to undermine the belief in the superiority of the just life to the unjust life and therewith the belief in the goodness of justice itself.[27] This "atheistical trend of early Greek philosophy," as one scholar has called it, seemed to lead to the conclusion that the gods do not exist, that there are no divine sanctions for morality, and therefore that everything is permitted to human beings.[28] Unwilling or unable to accept this conclusion, the cities of ancient Greece strove to quiet and even to silence the philosophers. And, in doing so, they understood themselves to be acting not only on behalf of themselves and their gods but on behalf of justice itself.

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The religious persecution of the philosophers posed a grave threat to the very survival of philosophy in ancient Greece. The philosophers were defenseless in the face of the hostility of the Greek cities. The threat of imprisonment, exile, or even execution hung over their heads at all times.[29] Over time such persecution must have reduced philosophers to solitude, silence, and even to extinction.

It is true that, in the twentieth century, there have been some who have denied that philosophers in general and Socrates in particular were persecuted for religious reasons in ancient Greece. Most prominently, John Burnet claimed that Socrates was put to death not because he was believed to be impious but rather because of his criticism of the democracy and its leaders.[30] Since this claim has been repeated by such scholars as Taylor, G. M. A. Grube, and I. F. Stone, and since I believe it is mistaken, I wish to examine it in some detail.[31]

Burnet writes:

> We have now to ask why Sokrates was charged with irreligion and why he was put to death. We must at once put aside the idea that it was for not believing the stories about the gods. It is not likely that any educated man believed these, and uneducated people probably knew little about them. There was no church and no priesthood, and therefore the conception of religious orthodoxy did not exist. So far as mythology was concerned, you might take any liberty.

Burnet's claim that the impiety charge against Socrates was not the real charge against him is based, then, on the broader claim that Greek piety did not entail "belief in narratives of any kind." "No one," he goes on to say, "could be prosecuted for what we call religious opinions."[32] And earlier in this book he claims, "Speculative opinions . . . were no part of Greek religion, which consisted entirely in worship and not in theological affirmations or negations."[33] According to Burnet, the Greeks did not care whether or not men's opinions were pious—that is, whether or not they actually believed in the gods—so long as their actions were not impious.[34] And, since Socrates' actions were not impious, he could not have been condemned to death for impiety. Therefore, Burnet concludes, he must have been condemned for his association with the antidemocratic Critias and Alcibiades.[35]

Burnet's explanation of why Socrates was condemned is, however, contradicted by Plato's own words and by the historical evidence available to us from other ancient sources. Although Burnet says that "Plato indicates in the clearest possible manner that Sokrates really owed his death to his political attitude," Plato himself says in the *Seventh Letter*, which

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Burnet regards as genuine, that Socrates was condemned to death for impiety *tout court* (325b1–c5).[36] And in the *Apology* (26a8–b7) and *Euthyphro* (2b12-3b4), Plato presents Socrates as saying that, by charging him with corrupting the youth, the Athenians were specifically charging him with teaching the youth not to believe in the gods of the city. Furthermore, according to Plato's Socrates and Athenian Stranger, the standard charge against philosophers was atheism, that is, the opinion that the gods do not exist.[37] Plato, then, indicates quite clearly that Socrates owed his condemnation primarily to the Athenians' opinion that he was impious.

Moreover, Burnet overlooks the fact that, in addition to being regarded as antidemocratic, Socrates' companions, Alcibiades and Critias, were also regarded as impious. Alcibiades was condemned to death for impiety, and Critias was a well known atheist.[38] Even the political hostility against Socrates, then, was connected with the belief that he and his companions were impious.[39]

Finally, in order to maintain his view that the Greeks did not prosecute men for their religious opinions, Burnet is compelled to give accounts of the impiety trials of the philosophers which are at odds with ancient accounts of those trials. He says that "even Diagoras, the typical atheist of those days, was not tried for his opinions, but for offences in language against the temples and festivals." But ancient writers state clearly that Diagoras was condemned for being an atheist, that is, for his opinion that the gods do not exist, and not merely for his language against temples and festivals or for his actions.[40] In his discussion of the impiety charge against Anaxagoras, Burnet implies that he was accused of impiety for political reasons. But Plato and Plutarch both indicate that he was brought to trial primarily for religious reasons.[41] Finally, Burnet claims that it is "highly improbable" that Protagoras was accused of impiety. He then remarks that, even if Protagoras did say, "With regard to the gods, I cannot feel sure that they are or that they are not. . . ." (Burnet's own translation), "There is surely nothing impious in these words from any point of view, and certainly none from the Greek." Yet ancient writers report that Protagoras was indeed accused of impiety, that he was forced to flee Athens, and that his books were burned in the Athenian agora precisely because of the very statement that Burnet cites.[42]

Burnet's remark about Protagoras is noteworthy because it indicates how he may have arrived at the conclusion that the Greeks never prosecuted anyone for his opinions about the gods. Burnet himself evidently believes that a man can be pious without being convinced that gods exist. And he evidently assumes that the Greeks must have shared this opinion and consequently must have tolerated any and all opinions about their gods. Therefore, he concludes, the Greeks never prosecuted anyone for his

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religious opinions. But Burnet's opinion about piety is not one which the Greeks held.[43] As I have tried to show, the conviction that gods exist—and, specifically, that gods who reward the righteous and punish the wicked exist—was, in the Greeks' view, the foundation not only of their religious life but of their political, moral, and family life as well. Accordingly, they regarded any challenge to that fundamental conviction as an intolerable challenge to their whole way of life.[44]

By claiming, then, that the Greeks never prosecuted philosophers or anyone else for their religious opinions, Burnet overlooks the relevant historical evidence. But I would suggest that Burnet fails to appreciate the gravity of the impiety charge against the philosophers above all because he fails to appreciate the gravity of the religious question as both the Greek many and the philosophers understood that question. He fails to appreciate the political importance of religion in the ancient city and hence fails to appreciate the illiberal character of the ancient city.[45] Consequently he fails to recognize the hostile context within which the Greek philosophers lived and, in Socrates' case, died.

### *III. The Doubts of Socrates' Companions*

Philosophy at the time of Socrates' death was, then, an activity fraught with danger. A young man—as Socrates' principal interlocutors in the *Phaedo* all are at this time (see 89a3, d2-5)—would know that, by devoting himself to philosophy, he would be risking his good name, his well-being, and even his life. At best, his fellow citizens would regard him as ridiculous and contemptible. At worst, they would view him as a criminal who deserves to be punished by men and by gods.[46] And even sophisticated men would despise him as an unmanly man who is unable to defend himself against his enemies.[47]

On the day that Socrates' last conversation is to take place, his companions must be especially aware of the dangers that attend the philosophic life. During the preceding thirty days, they have gathered every morning in the courtroom where Socrates was convicted and condemned to death. They have then spent the day in prison conversing with their friend. Finally, they have left him in the evening wondering whether the next day would be his last (see 59d1–e7). Throughout this difficult period, Socrates' companions must have been wondering what fate they, too, might suffer if they persist in their devotion to the philosophic life.

Up until now, Socrates' companions have been willing to brave these dangers and have devoted themselves to the pursuit of wisdom in the company and under the guidance of their friend. But on the day that

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Socrates is to be executed, their confidence in the wisdom and goodness of the philosophic life must be shaken. For how, they must wonder, can it be wise to engage in a pursuit which renders a man incapable of saving himself or his friends from the greatest of dangers?[48] And how can it be good to lead a life which exposes one to the threat of persecution by men and of punishment by the gods?

Socrates' two young Theban companions, Simmias and Cebes, may have additional reasons for wondering about the wisdom and the goodness of the philosophic life. As we know from the only other dialogue in which Plato mentions them together, the *Crito*, these two, along with Crito, were leaders of the plot to rescue Socrates from prison.[49] Simmias and Cebes know, then, that Socrates could have avoided his execution and that he deliberately chose not to do so. Socrates did explain to Crito that he was refusing to escape out of respect for the laws of Athens (50a6–54d1). And Crito probably repeated this conversation to Cebes and Simmias. But, being Thebans, Cebes and Simmias may not feel much respect for the laws of Athens and may not have been convinced by the arguments that Socrates made to the Athenian Crito. Moreover, insofar as they take Socrates' claim that the philosophic life is the best way of life more seriously than Crito does, they may doubt that Socrates would be willing to sacrifice his life out of respect for the laws of Athens unless he himself had come to despair of his philosophic life.[50] But, if Socrates himself is renouncing his claim that the philosophic life is the best way of life, how can they persist in believing that claim? It would seem, then, that Simmias and Cebes have especially strong reasons for questioning the goodness of the philosophic life on the day of Socrates' death. For this reason, it is perhaps appropriate that Socrates address his last defense of the philosophic life to them in particular.

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