

Better Off Dead: Socrates' Contradictory Attitudes in the *Apology*

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates makes two arguments seemingly hoping to prove that death is not to be feared. In the first, at 28c, he claims that, since we do not know if death is a blessing or a curse, we should not be afraid of it; and in the second, starting at 40c, he argues that since death must be one of two things – either an eternal sleep or a paradise-like afterlife. Each of his arguments has struck some scholars (Armleder, Roochnik) as unconvincing separately, and what's more they seem to be at odds with one another, although this point has been disputed (McPherran, Rudebusch). The Socratic problem only renders the debate more difficult: the *Apology* is generally considered to be the truest representation of Socrates that Plato provides us, but this does not guarantee the historicity of any individual passage. Despite these challenges, I hope to show that Plato was aware that the two arguments were contradictory, intentionally left them in the dialogue, and that his intention, just as in his other works, was as much to inspire discussion and critical thought as it was to honor the memory of Socrates.

There are, then, two great questions that will be addressed in this paper. The first, the Socratic Problem, though it cannot be resolved absolutely, will be explored in so far as it concerns the *Apology*, although references will be made to other works, especially the later ones in which Socrates' role is reduced. I will consider modern critical opinions and ancient sources; but the most convincing evidence for Plato's hand in the *Apology* comes from the *Apology* itself. Brickhouse notes that the conclusion that death is a blessing can be found in various other dialogues, but the placement of the speech in the *Apology* seems quite suspicious. I hope to show that the most reasonable conclusion is that most of the final speech is Plato's invention; and that, by extension, we may consider the whole of the *Apology* as Plato's own work, and not a biographical account.

The second major issue will be establishing that the two arguments are faulty and at odds, and that Plato was aware of this. This will mostly involve a discussion of modern attempts to defend the two claims; however, I will also make use of other examples of apparently obvious contradictions in the Platonic corpus; I will also examine all the other cases where death is discussed. Since my paper will accuse Plato of a kind of lying, I will also discuss Plato's own ambivalent attitudes towards lies, as discussed in the *Republic*.

Plato was indisputably a great mind, and his works show the keenest sense for detail; we cannot simply maintain that he mistakenly made flagrant contradictions and gross errors. Rather, we must evaluate them critically, we must converse about them, just as Plato felt that all philosophy should be conducted: and I would argue that Plato's works have transcended their time far better than most works of philosophy for precisely this reason.