

The trial of Socrates

It is hard to judge in these troubled times in Athens, with memories of great political turmoil and deep civic division still fresh in everyone's minds, when danger to the nation, coming from Sparta and others, is barely past and could easily spring up again. Yet, while we cannot forget the context, we must put it aside to some extent, lest we should be led by revenge and fear.

It is hard to judge when ideas, words – unwritten at that – are incriminated. Words are ambiguous, their meaning easily distorted or misunderstood. How can their effect be measured? Are they truly equivalent to deeds? And another, major problem arises immediately: in what cases does freedom of thought and expression stop being a conquest to be encouraged and become, in effect, a threat to be suppressed?

It is hard, finally, to judge exceptional talent. Confronted with it, one may be inclined to leniency, out of awe and the sense that it must be protected ; on the other hand, the reaction may be additional severity : the greater the talent, the greater the responsibility.

In such circumstances is our court placed.

The charges levied against Socrates are serious. The first is that he subverted the loyalty of the youth towards Athens. A friend and mentor of Alcibiades, Charmides and Critias, Socrates is depicted by the prosecution as the inspirator of these men who have unquestionably done Athenian democracy a great deal of harm. Alcibiades could even be called traitor to the city. However, it is not they who are on trial. They are dead.

Have we been given evidence to substantiate this charge of evil, criminal influence? I do not think so. While it has been made abundantly clear that Socrates is critical of democracy, it has not been shown that he supports, directly or indirectly, covertly or openly, its violent overthrow. This cannot be presumed. Criticizing or belittling political institutions, however unpleasant, does not equate to enticing others to do away with them by force. On the contrary, Socrates, whose purpose is, as we know, to promote education and self-enlightenment, argues that any educated person will avoid violence.

In truth, Socrates could be held responsible for the effects of his teachings only if, firstly, they were directly bent on provoking criminal action, and secondly, if several actual crimes could be directly and certainly traced back to his words. I see no evidence of such content in his teachings, nor of such a link between his beliefs and the wrongdoings of others.

As for his actions, they go against the unspoken charge that Socrates supports Sparta and the Tyrants. In times of war, he was a brave soldier. In quiet times, he behaved as a citizen respectful of the laws of the city and did not foment plots or join rebellious or unpatriotic organizations. He did not in the least benefit from the Four Hundred or the Thirty, either in terms of money, power or influence. On the contrary, a law was passed during the latter period that forbade him from teaching. In short, not a single unlawful, unpatriotic or pro-tyranny action can be held against him. He can only be reproached for not participating in public affairs and for not fighting tyranny (although he did resist taking part in the arrest

and subsequent execution of Leon of Salamis under the Thirty). His detachment is difficult to understand: is it caused by fear, obedience to what the god commanded or preference for intellectual debate over action? Socrates himself says all three. At any rate, it is not punishable by law.

The second charge, that of impiety, is also political in nature, as disrespect for the gods of the city amounts to disloyalty. In our day and age, religious nonconformity disrupts civic unity.

No evidence, however, of such disrespect has been brought to us. On the contrary, it appears that Socrates always acquitted himself of his religious duties, paid tributes to the gods, made sacrifices at their temples. He has publicly denied atheism. Whatever his inmost beliefs may have been, he kept up appearances and behaved in a right and proper way vis-à-vis the gods whom the city recognised.

As to the other element of the charge, the allegation that Socrates brought into the city new, lesser deities, it seems to relate to his acknowledgement of the presence of a divine, inner voice within him. This may be ridiculed or admired; but in any case, he has not tried to make a cult of his *daimonion*, which would have been unlawful if not done according to the rules. Thus it is not a threat to the good of the Athenian community as a whole.

And neither are Socrates' teachings and existence.

I vote to acquit.

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