

Commentary: Plato's *Apology* 40c5-41b1

Plato's *Apology* ends with a final speech by Socrates. Condemned to death, he first addresses the jurors that voted for his death, afterwards delivering what has been called his 'Two Things Argument' (Austin, 2010, p. 1) to the jurors who had acquitted him. This commentary will examine part of the argument (40c5-41b1, see Appendix for text) in detail, aiming to explain the grammar, vocabulary and provide context for a student of Ancient Greek. It will also survey some scholarly reactions and treatments of this final speech, and the arguments I find most convincing for understanding the author's purpose.

Socrates begins with a hortatory aorist subjunctive 'Let us consider...' (Ἐννοήσωμεν... 40c4) to invite his audience to join him, and follow his reasoning together. He is confident that 'there is much hope that death is a good thing' (ὥς πολλὴ ἐλπίς ἐστὶν ἀγαθὸν αὐτὸ εἶναι 40c4). Without context αὐτὸ could be ambiguous, but we know it refers to 'death' from the previous paragraph.

Socrates introduces his 'Two Things Argument', giving two possibilities for the outcome of death (δυσὸν γὰρ θάτερόν ἐστιν τὸ τεθνάναι 40c5). The first 'Thing' may be that it is 'as if' (ἢ γὰρ οἷον 40c5) the dead, introduced using the perfect active participle (τὸν τεθνεῶτα 40c6), have no perception or consciousness (μηδὲ αἰσθῆσιν 40c6-7). This entire sentence is enhanced rhetorically with no fewer than four negations (μηδὲν... μηδὲ... μηδεμίαν μηδενὸς... 40c5-6), an excessive use that emphasises to the listening audience the state of 'nothingness' he is describing, and perhaps even his personal view on the likelihood of its truth. The second 'Thing' in his argument is introduced in a non-committal way, employing the mediopassive participle to give the sense of 'as it is said' (κατὰ τὰ λεγόμενα 40c6), and indefinite pronouns to add further vagueness. Socrates speaks of the soul experiencing both 'some change' (μεταβολή τις 40c7), and a 'migration' (μετοίκησις 40c7). He does not offer

any further clarification as to where yet, stating only 'from the soul's place here to another place' (τῇ ψυχῇ τοῦ τόπου τοῦ ἐνθένδε εἰς ἄλλον τόπον 40c7).

Many commentators have taken issue with this argument. Some dislike the idea that Socrates presents dreamless sleep as a positive gain (Leibowitz, 2010, p. 169), as how would you know if you never wake up? Many have argued that it does not cover all possibilities for what death is (Stokes, 1997, p.189), or even that Socrates intentionally gives a bad argument to fool and comfort his followers (Roochnik, 1985, pp. 219-20). Commentators who support the argument, such as Van Harten (2011), tend to reconcile it by reading it in context with the rest of the Apology, attempting to find Socrates (or Plato's) true motivation behind what he is saying. I find the second approach more fruitful, and further analysis of the grammar and vocabulary used by Plato will demonstrate further evidence for this view.

With the two options introduced, Socrates begins by exploring what it would be like if death is unconsciousness. The sense of indefiniteness runs throughout, with the frequent use of indefinite pronouns and conditional forms. Next he uses the subjunctive in a subordinate clause with ἄν, combined with ἐπειδὴ (ἐπειδὴν τις καθεύδων μὴδ' ὄναρ μὴδ' ἐν ὅρᾳ 40d2), to describe 'when someone sleeps and sees no dream at all', followed by a potential use of the optative (θαυμάσιον κέρδος ἂν εἴη ὁ θάνατος 40d2-3) to conjecture that 'death would be a wonderful gain'. Following this reasoning, he argues:

For I would think, that if were necessary for someone to single out that night in which he slept so deeply that he did not even see a dream, and then, after considering and comparing all the other days and nights of his life with that one night, it were necessary for him to say how many better and more pleasant days and nights he has lived in his own life than this night, I think not only a private individual, but the mighty

king [of Persia] himself could number these against his other days and nights. (40d3 - 40e2)

The conditional forms will continue to dominate this entire argument. He begins with a remote future potential conditional (ἐγὼ γὰρ ἂν οἶμαι, εἴ...), continues the point through with δεῖ in the present optative (δεῖ ταύτην τὴν νύκτα... δεῖ...εἰπεῖν...), and reiterates, that if someone were to do as he is suggesting, that 'I think not only that' (οἶμαι ἂν μὴ ὅτι...) neither a random person, nor even the Great King of Persia would disagree with him. The King was held by the average Greek as the symbol of happiness (Denyer, 2019, p.122), and is used here to strengthen the claim that everyone enjoys peaceful, dreamless sleep, and thus should not fear death, if this is what death is like. This use of the King to support his argument may seem strange at first, as it does not align with Socrates' views in other dialogues. In *Gorgias*, Socrates claims he does not know whether the King is happy, because 'I do not know his relationship to justice and education (οὐ γὰρ οἶδα παιδείας ὅπως ἔχει καὶ δικαιοσύνης, Pl. Grg. 470e). To me, this reasoning misses the point. It is clear that Socrates is not stating a definitive position, only how he thinks he would feel if it were true. Next, with a 'resumptive οὖν', Socrates returns to his main point (Denyer, 2019, p. 122), that 'If then death is such a thing, I for my part say it is a benefit' (εἰ οὖν τοιοῦτον ὁ θάνατός ἐστιν, κέρδος ἔγωγε λέγω' (40e1-2), a rhetorical repetition to focus the listener on the point of his conjecture.

Next, Socrates proposes the second 'Thing' that death may be, in a more detailed and imaginative telling than the first one. He describes a scene of an Underworld ruled by just and true judges, where he could converse with the dead and continue his divine mission to discover who is truly wise or not (40e4-41c4) for all time. Although he continues to distance himself by speaking in conditional forms of things that are 'said to be true' (καὶ ἀληθὴ ἐστιν τὰ λεγόμενα... 40e5), there is evidence to suspect Socrates prefers this possibility of death more than the first, as he has put much more effort into the construction of this argument

than the first. But for what purpose? Van Harten has convincingly argued that Socrates is really challenging the 'just' jurors to choose between a 'dormant existence' or continuing to pursue the examined life of a philosopher, the only kind of life 'Socrates considers worth living' (2011, p. 177), and does so with the rhetorical strategies that follow. He begins:

But if death is migration from here to another place, and what is said is true, that indeed all the dead are there, what greater good could there be than this, gentlemen of the jury? (40e4-41a1)

A contrasting conditional is set up here (εἰ δ' αὖ... 40e4), with ἀποδημῆσαι, the aorist active infinitive of ἀποδημέω ('to emigrate') used aspectually to indicate a one-time event, not the past. He forms a rhetorical question with a comparative adjective and genitive (τί μείζον ἀγαθὸν τούτου εἴη ἅν... 40e6), which unambiguously claims there could be no 'greater good' than this result.

His description follows a pattern: twice he lists four names (Μίνως τε καὶ Παδάμανθος καὶ Αἰακός καὶ Τριπτόλεμος... 41a3-4 and Ὀρφεὶ συγγενέσθαι καὶ Μουσαίῳ καὶ Ἡσιόδῳ καὶ Ὀμήρῳ 41a5-6) followed by a rhetorical question in the potential optative, asking first 'would that be a miserable journey?' (ἄρα φαύλη ἂν εἴη ἡ ἀποδημία; 41a5), and then 'what price would any of you ['just' jurors] pay for that?' (ἐπὶ πόσῳ ἂν τις δέξαιτ' ἂν ὑμῶν; 41a6-b1). Here he switches his pattern of asking what 'someone' might do with indefinite pronouns, to address the jurors directly. He also dismisses the value of the Athenians who had condemned him and praises these 'true' Underworld judges, stating:

For if someone were to arrive in Hades, having rid himself of these self-styled jurors, he will find the truly just judges—those who are said to sit in judgment there—
(41a1–5)

To finish his rhetorical call to the higher road of philosopher for the 'just' jurors, Socrates is very explicit in stating his approval if death were this second 'Thing', stating he 'would gladly die many times over' (ἐγὼ μὲν γὰρ πολλάκις ἐθέλω τεθνάναι... 41b1), although always keeping some distance, the provision always being 'if this is true' (εἰ ταῦτ' ἔστιν ἀληθὴ 41b1).

There is one interesting grammatical feature which challenges this interpretation, Socrates' use of 'he will find' (εὕρήσει... 41a2). The future indicative is rare in conditional temporal clauses, due to its modal neutrality. The reality of a situation is presupposed by a temporal clause, thus making a statement on its probability contradictory (Slings, 1994, p. 389).

Elsewhere throughout this speech, Socrates has almost always used the potential optative, so why does he use the future indicative here? One possibility is that the potential optative use in this case would have indicated doubt (Slings, 1994, p. 389), harming the otherwise very strong case in favour of this second 'Thing' Socrates is making. Another possibility could be that we do not fully understand the meaning of the future indicative in this context. With only four occurrences of this form from Homer to Plato, it is harder to say for certain exactly what the nuance may be.

However, in this case, I would argue the structure and rhetorical features highlighted in this commentary show Socrates' clear preference for the second 'Thing' that death could be, and that he believes it will be better for his supporters to pursue an examined life of philosophy. That he would do this so with his last opportunity to speak in public before his death seems like a very Socratic thing to do.

Word Count: 1634

Appendix

Text of the *Apology*:

(40e)	Ἐννοήσωμεν δὲ καὶ τῇδε ὡς πολλὴ ἐλπίς ἐστὶν ἀγαθὸν αὐτὸ εἶναι.
5	δοῦσιν γὰρ θάτερόν ἐστιν τὸ τεθνάναι· ἢ γὰρ οἷον μὴδὲν εἶναι μὴδὲ αἴσθησιν μὴδεμίαν μὴδενὸς ἔχειν τὸν τεθνεῶτα, ἢ κατὰ τὰ λεγόμενα μεταβολὴ τις τυγχάνει οὕσα καὶ μετοίκησις τῇ ψυχῇ τοῦ τόπου τοῦ
d	ἐνθένδε εἰς ἄλλον τόπον. καὶ εἴτε δὴ μὴδεμία αἴσθησις ἐστὶν, ἀλλ' οἷον ὕπνος, ἐπειδὴν τις καθεύδων μὴδ' ὄναρ μὴδὲν ὁρᾷ, θαυμάσιον κέρδος ἂν εἴη ὁ θάνατος· ἐγὼ γὰρ ἂν οἶμαι, εἴ τινα ἐκλεξάμενον δέοι ταύτην τὴν νύκτα ἐν ᾗ οὕτω κατέδραθεν ὥστε μὴδὲ ὄναρ ἰδεῖν, καὶ τὰς ἄλλας
5	νύκτας τε καὶ ἡμέρας τὰς τοῦ βίου τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ ἀντιπαραθέντα ταύτῃ τῇ νυκτὶ δέοι σκεψάμενον εἰπεῖν πόσας ἡμῖνον καὶ ἡδίων ἡμέρας καὶ νύκτας ταύτης τῆς νυκτὸς βεβίωκεν ἐν τῷ ἑαυτοῦ βίῳ, οἶμαι ἂν
e	μὴ ὅτι ἰδιώτην τινά, ἀλλὰ τὸν μέγαν βασιλέα εὐαριθμήτους ἂν εὐρεῖν αὐτὸν ταύτας πρὸς τὰς ἄλλας ἡμέρας καὶ νύκτας· εἰ οὖν τοιοῦτον ὁ θάνατός ἐστιν, κέρδος ἔγωγε λέγω· καὶ γὰρ οὐδὲν πλείων ὁ πᾶς χρόνος φαίνεται οὕτω δὴ εἶναι ἢ μία νύξ. εἰ δ' αὖ οἷον ἀποδημησαί ἐστιν ὁ
5	θάνατος ἐνθένδε εἰς ἄλλον τόπον, καὶ ἀληθὴ ἐστὶν τὰ λεγόμενα, ὥς ἄρα ἐκεῖ εἰσι πάντες οἱ τεθνεῶτες, τί μείζον ἀγαθὸν τούτου εἴη ἂν, ὢ
41	ἄνδρες δικασταί; εἰ γάρ τις ἀφικόμενος εἰς Ἄϊδου, ἀπαλλαγεῖς τούτων τῶν φασκόντων δικαστῶν εἶναι, εὐρήσει τοὺς ὡς ἀληθῶς δικαστάς, οἵπερ καὶ λέγονται ἐκεῖ δικάζειν, Μίνως τε καὶ Ῥαδάμανθυς καὶ Αἰακὸς καὶ Τριπτόλεμος καὶ ἄλλοι ὅσοι τῶν ἡμιθέων δίκαιοι ἐγένοντο ἐν τῷ
5	ἑαυτῶν βίῳ, ἄρα φαύλη ἂν εἴη ἡ ἀποδημία; ἢ αὖ Ὀρφεὶ συγγενέσθαι καὶ Μουσαίῳ καὶ Ἡσιόδῳ καὶ Ὀμήρῳ ἐπὶ πόσῳ ἂν τις δέξαιτ' ἂν
b	ὕμῳ; ἐγὼ μὲν γὰρ πολλὰκις ἐθέλω τεθνάναι εἰ ταῦτ' ἐστὶν ἀληθὴ.

Bibliography

Austin, Emily A. (2010) 'Prudence and the fear of death in Plato's « Apology »', *Ancient Philosophy*, 30 (1), pp. 39-55.

Brickhouse, T. and Smith, N. (1986) "The Divine Sign Did Not Oppose Me": A Problem in Plato's Apology,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 16(3), pp. 511–526.

Burnet, John (Ed.) (1924) *Eutyphro, Apology of Socrates and Crito*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Denyer, Nicholas (Ed.) (2019) *The Apology Of Socrates*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Doherty, F. C. (Ed.), (1923) *The Martyrdom Of Socrates: Apology & Crito With Selections From Phaedo*. London: Bristol Classical Press.

Gomperz, Theodor, and G. G. Berry (Trans.) (1905) *Greek Thinkers: A History Of Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. 2. London: J. Murray.

Jones, Russell E. (2013) 'Felix Socrates?' *Philosophia*, 43, pp. 77-98.

Leibowitz, D. (2010). *The Ironic Defense of Socrates: Plato's Apology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Plato, and Harold North Fowler (Trans.) (1914) *Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus*. Loeb Classical Library 36. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Plato, Christopher Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy (Trans.) (2017) *Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo*. Loeb Classical Library 36. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Roochnik, D. L. (1985) 'Apology 40c4-41e7: Is Death Really a Gain?', *The Classical Journal*, 80(3), pp. 212–220.

Rudebusch, George (1991) 'Death Is One Of Two Things' *Ancient Philosophy*, 11 (1), pp. 35-45

Slings, S.R. (1994) *Plato's Apology of Socrates: A Literary and Philosophical Study with a Running Commentary. Edited and Completed from the Papers of the Late E. de Strycker, S. J.* Boston: BRILL.

Stokes, M. C. (1997) *Plato: Apology*. Warminster: Liverpool University Press

Taylor, M. R. (2024) 'Socrates' Final Argument in Apology', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 105, pp. 291-305..

Van Harten, Alice (2011) 'Socrates on life and death (Plato, Apology 40C5-41C7)', *Cambridge Classical Journal*, 57, pp. 165-183.