

Four Texts on Socrates: Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito and Aristophanes' Clouds Study Guide

Four Texts on Socrates: Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito and Aristophanes' Clouds by Thomas G. West

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Plot Summary

Socrates (469-399 B.C.) is widely considered to be the founding father of philosophy, and while there were a handful of 'pre-Socratic' philosophers, Socrates lived a philosophical life of such power and influence that after his death, philosophy would become a widely accepted practice in the West, lasting until the present day. While much of what we know about Socrates comes from the dialogues of his student, Plato (another of history's great philosophers), historical inquiry suggests that much of what Plato has Socrates say is genuine and that we can learn something of the great man's life and character from these records (among others). Socrates was a citizen of Athens who lived a life without material possessions and creature comforts in order to spend his days in Athens engaged in the study of philosophical topics, particularly through dialoguing with others and asking penetrating questions of the Athenian elite. Ultimately this practice of leading 'the examined life' infuriates the Athenian people so much that they decide to execute him, making Socrates the great martyr of philosophy.

Four Texts on Socrates contains four of the most important documents ever written about Socrates. All are dialogues of one form or another. Socrates never wrote down any of his views, so all the writings concern Socrates from the perspective of another. The first three dialogues are written by Socrates' famed student Plato, whereas the fourth is written by the famous Greek satirist Aristophanes. Plato was a stronger defender of Socrates, whereas Aristophanes was a critic, so distinct pictures of Socrates come through the texts.

The first dialogue, the Euthyphro, is a dialogue between Socrates and an acquaintance named Euthyphro. Their conversation occurs in a government office, where Euthyphro plans on prosecuting his father and Socrates plans to stand trial for corrupting the youth and impiety. Both are thought to be impious by Athenian society at large, and so Socrates asks Euthyphro what piety consists in, after which Socrates systematically shows Euthyphro that he has no idea what piety is. The next dialogue, the Apology, is an account of Socrates' trial for corrupting the youth. Instead of a dialogue between two individuals, the Apology occurs in front of a number of people, particularly an Athenian jury. Socrates gives three speeches in his defense, one before the jury deliberates, one on behalf of a lighter sentence and the final a defense of his actions and ideals after being condemned to die. The speeches largely consist in criticizing the morals of Athenian society against the philosophers' ideal of the pursuit of truth. The third Platonic dialogue, the Crito, occurs while Socrates is in prison. A friend of Socrates', Crito, comes to encourage Socrates to escape; in response, Socrates argues that he is duty bound to obey Athenian laws and that death is nothing to fear. Finally, in The Clouds, Aristophanes presents a dramatic play that mocks Socrates by painting him as an atheist with perverse moral views. The play is a comedy and is so funny that it labels Socrates as an impious corrupter of the youth even twenty-four years after its first performance, at Socrates' trial.



Plato's Euthyphro

Plato's Euthyphro Summary and Analysis

The Euthyphro is the first of the three famous Socratic dialogues concerning the arrest, trial and execution of the great Greek philosophy, Socrates. The Euthyphro is a dialogue between two individuals: Socrates and his acquaintance, Euthyphro. Their conversation takes place at a government office, where both are engaged in business with the court. They relate their cases to one another. Euthyphro is a prosecutor, but is charging his father for murder that apparently involves some disloyalty to the gods, or impiety. Socrates, on the other hand, is going to be put on trial for his own perceived impiety, or for 'corrupting the youth' with his philosophy and philosophical practices. Socrates, true to his nature as a rigorous interlocutor, asks Euthyphro to explain to him what it means to be pious. The dialogue continues with Euthyphro offering theories of piety and Socrates shooting them down. Towards the end of the dialogue, Euthyphro becomes frustrated, and stops the conversation by claiming that he has other obligations to attend to.

An unusual feature of the Euthyphro is that the dialogue begins with Socrates and Euthyphro confessing to one another that they have a close connection to the gods. Euthyphro believes that he has special divine knowledge, which including some prophesy, or knowledge about the future. Socrates claims that a divine voice speaks to him from time to time. The Athenian people think ill of them both; they are furious with Socrates' questioning of Athenian ideas; his prosecutor Meletus is quite serious about his trial. But Euthyphro is considered pathetic and laughable for taking his own father to trial.

Socrates and Euthyphro have religious differences, however. Euthyphro believes all the local teachings about the gods, particularly Zeus. But Socrates rejects these common beliefs. As a result, Euthyphro's conceptions of piety are bound up with Greek myth. His first definition of piety is that it is the punishment of wrongdoing; as an example, he cites the fact that Zeus imprisoned Kronos, his father; Euthyphro sees his prosecution of his father in the same light. Piety then, generally speaking, is doing what the gods do. His general answer to the question, then, is that piety is "what is dear to the gods."

However, Socrates quickly points out that according to Greek myth the gods disagree. As a result, 'what is dear to the gods' contains contradictions. Euthyphro then suggests that piety is what is dear to every god. Socrates' next refutation proceeds more circuitously. He first has Euthyphro agree that things that are loved are loved because they are loved by someone. Yet loving something and the thing being pious are distinct, so what the gods love cannot be necessarily what is pious, despite the fact that these two ideas most overlap.

Socrates argument may seem obscure, but the point is not as strange as one might think. It is good for humans to be pious, and so if piety is what is dear to the gods, then



the human good should be dear to the gods. This will be true if the gods' judgments of what is dear to them are guided by some objective standard, say by attention to what is true, beautiful and good. However, suppose that there are no such standards, that the gods' wills are the only such standards. As a result, what is good for us could be determined by a wholly arbitrary will of a god that hates us. This seems wrong; but now suppose that the gods' judgment of what is dear to them is guided by some deeper, objective standard. In this case, what the gods will, and what is dear to them, becomes a spare wheel. For if what they judge as dear is based on an objective standard and piety is based on what is dear to the gods, then why isn't piety just defined according to the objective standard? Therefore, if wise men can access the objective truth (and Socrates thinks they can at least try), then they need not consult the gods, only the good.

Euthyphro next suggests that piety is engaging in skillful service on behalf of the gods. When the Athenian people are pious, the gods reward them. Socrates understands Euthyphro to be proposing the piety is a kind of art by which goods are extracted from the gods by exchange. This is problematic, however, because if the gods are truly gods, then what could they possibly need from humans? Euthyphro is quick to deny this, and claims that the gods only love what men give them but do not need them. And so Socrates has trapped Euthyphro once again, for he has returned without realizing it to his earlier definition of piety. At this point, Euthyphro decides to end the conversation.

While the dialogue ends without a firm resolution on the nature of piety, the reader can glimpse Socrates's view. The god that he mentions tells him that he is the wisest of men in another part of his life. He believes that this is false, since he thinks he knows nothing. So he spends his life trying to find the person that knows more than he does; his efforts always result in failure. Thus, Socrates has his own conception of piety - rigorous, logical pursuit of truth irrespective of any religious, political, moral or social authority.



Plato's Apology

Plato's Apology Summary and Analysis

The Apology is Plato's story of Socrates' trial in Athens. Socrates believes that the central question of life is how one should live. This can only be answered by considered which beings are the best and the highest, because we can only consider how we should live in comparison to some idea. However, the Athenian standard of the good life is obeying the rules created by the gods. Socrates rejects this answer, considering it incoherent or at least unsupported. He claims that he knows little about the ultimate things and prefers to challenge the dogma of his fellow citizens. He also believes that false certainty impedes true education, so he questions and challenges many city authorities. For this reason, Socrates was put on trial by the Athenians, for corrupting the youth. The Apology consists of the three speeches Socrates gave in his defense.

The first speech is the longest; it is his defense presented to the jury. The reader should understand the speech as divided into first parts: (i) Socrates explains why he speaks as he does, (ii) he responds to those who 'first' accused him, (iii) he responds to those who presently accuse him. In (iv), Socrates discusses some features of his mode of life and in (v) he discusses the nature of being just and noble.

In the first part, the preface, Socrates argues that his coarse speech has an advantage over his accusers' beautiful speech: it speaks the truth. True speech, though, is often not persuasive because it is hard to properly present. Socrates more or less says that he is lost from the start because he must proceed according to the truth and the community proceeds according to what impresses them. As a result, the philosopher who tells the true will be hated.

In his first response, Socrates reviews the insults that have been perpetuated about him in the past and are today accepted. People have called him someone who is a mere 'busybody' who wastes his time thinking on abstract matters, who makes sophistical arguments, who focuses on questioning the gods through science, and worse of all, he teaches this dangerous nonsense to the Athenian youth. The claim that Socrates is a busybody derives from Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, but Socrates denies that he has engaged in these scientific pursuits (physics and astronomy today). However, he admits that he studied these matters as a young man (but after the trial admits that this was a lie). Many who study science are accused of atheism, Socrates notes, because they will not accept polytheistic explanations at face value, but Socrates denies this and the jury is clearly unconvinced.

Now why would anyone lie about Socrates? He tells the jury about his important visit to the oracle at Delphi, who tells him that he is the wisest of all men. Socrates, however, rejects this, and decides to gather arguments to refuse the oracle. Yet when he interviews and discourses with all those he thought wise, he discovers that they don't know anything either. He discovered therefore that the oracle was right - he knew



nothing, but he knew that he knew nothing, which made him wiser than anyone else. So he then becomes a supporter of the god that the Delphic Oracle supposedly channeled. This displays Socrates' piety and explains why he has acted as he has.

Because of these inquiries, Socrates has become hated by the Athenian elite but has gained many followers from their children. These youth follow his method and make their family elders look stupid; because the young are reduce to their elders, and this is purportedly due to Socrates, he is charged with corrupting the youth. Socrates had not only challenged the Athenian elite's morality but their sense of the purpose of life; he had no right to do so. Socrates believes that his devotion to 'the god' i.e., his piety, led him to rightly challenge everyone.

In his response to the current accusations against him, he attempts to show that his prosecutor, Meletus, has an incoherent charge against him, although Socrates does not argue for his innocence. Socrates makes two replies to the claim that he corrupts the youth. First, he argues that those who know the laws are supposed to educate the youth, but this will necessarily be a small number of people, and that it is these people who alone can truly be said to corrupt the youth. So he could not corrupt the youth. His second argument is that he was incapable of corrupting the youth on purpose because even if he was merely self-interested, he would have realized that the corruption he caused would lead to retaliation. Since he wouldn't corrupt the youth intentionally, he only needs instruction, not punishment. He then argues that he is not impious because he thinks that Meletus has contradicted himself; but he says nothing about whether he believes in the gods, but acknowledges that Meletus' basic charge against him is that he promotes atheism. Since Socrates is not directly responding to the accusations against him, one might wonder whether he aims to be killed. His arguments are widely regarded to be full of holes, which has led some to speculate that he wanted to be a martyr for philosophy to help promote it and protect it from persecution in the end. Basically, Socrates is guilty. He doesn't believe in the gods of the city and has corrupted the young according to the definition of corruption in the law because he has convinced the youth to proceed in life by reason not according to the ways of the gods.

Socrates turns now to a digression, where he defends his way of life. This portion of his speech appears to be his central defense. For if he pursues a good life in a proper way, Athens' understanding of corruption must be defective. Socrates will argue both that in his public life, he is the savior of Athens and secondly will explain how he has been led to stay out of politics and pursue a private life. In the first argument, Socrates argues that his life is analogous to Achilles' because he fights against all odds on behalf of the just and the true. This is a better life than the Athenian ideal of manly self-assertion and political ambition. When the jury loudly objects, he changes his tune, arguing that he is practically subhuman, a pest, but that he at least serves the function of waking up the Athenian people.

His next argument is that he is not dangerous because he refrains from political activity. This is due to the fact that he has heard a divine voice since childhood that he feels he must obey because it is reasonable. The divine voice urged him not to get involved. Besides, he would have been killed in political life because those who fight for justice



are always killed. He next claims that he never claimed to teach his students anything, only to talk honestly with all.

In Socrates' conclusion he refuses to accept pity. He does not bring his family to court like others. Such a practice is cowardly. He claims therefore that his moral standards are higher than custom. The jury then votes him guilty.

The verdict is announced next and Socrates must be given a sentence. Meletus argues on behalf of death. In his defense, Socrates has to argue for another sentence, after which the jury will decide between the two sentences. Socrates argues that his sentence should be to have the city provide him with free meals and allow him to live in the sacred heart of Athens, the Prytaneum. This area of the city is reserved for great heroes and aristocrats, and Socrates claims that he is as great as any of them. Socrates' friends beg him to stop making this argument, instead pressuring him to suggest a fine. The jury was apparently so incensed by his first suggestion that they choose the death penalty. Socrates has dropped any discussion of the gods, talking about the standards of pure reason. It is almost as if he is committing suicide because he must know that his speeches are damning him to death.

Socrates is allowed to give a final speech before he is taken to prison to wait out the time before his execution. He first addresses the jurors who voted against him and he argues that his followers will visit similar harms on them by continuing Socrates' behavior, but on a grander scale than Socrates pursued. He turns to address those who defended him and asks them to engage in story-telling and discussion with him before he dies.

Socrates next argues that death is not harmful. First, he argues that if it were, the divine voice would have opposed him during his speech. Next, he claims that death is like sleep and therefore is good (despite the fact that he thinks thought is good), and second, if there is an afterlife, Socrates will be able to continue his philosophical practices with those who are dead. He asks the jury to believe that the gods will care for those who are good, but never says whether this is something he believes. He goes to prison. It is simply unclear why he went so willingly to his death. Some have suggested that he wished to be a martyr, others that he feared becoming unable to care for himself and the infirmities that come with old age. Still others argue that he proceeded out of principle.



Plato's Crito

Plato's Crito Summary and Analysis

The Crito follows the Apology chronologically; the dialogue finds Socrates in prison, with Socrates submitted to the laws of Athens and refusing to resist his death. Socrates' friend Crito tries to convince him to escape and go into exile rather than face death by execution. His friends have taken care of all the details; to survive, Socrates must merely agree to go along with the plan. Crito was unmoved by Socrates' defense of himself and was embarrassed by Socrates' behavior at the trial generally. In fact, Crito thinks Socrates unjust and cowardly because Socrates would not defend himself, not to mention his friends and family. Crito can be seen as holding the perspective of 'the many,' of condemning Socrates according to the norms and expectations of the Athenians. Socrates, however, has already rejected these norms and expectations as binding on him.

Socrates' response to Crito's condemnation is to argue that it is better from him to obey Athenian law and be executed. He cannot simply repeat his appeal to philosophy because Crito will be unsympathetic. Crito is also worried about how his reputation will suffer due to Socrates' actions. Socrates instead argues against Crito that he has a duty to obey the law. Since Crito cares about public opinion, certainly he must care about the authority of the law, and imagines the law as a great authority on the earth. He thereby makes his case that his obedience to the laws of Athens does not demonstrate any disrespectful behavior.

Socrates makes his case in two stages, first through a dialogue with Crito and second with a long speech. In the dialogue, Socrates first brings Crito to agree that the individual should follow the truth, not merely popular opinion. For this reason, experts should always be obeyed, because they are more likely to know what is best for those under their guidance. Next, Socrates makes the case that one should not commit injustice, for it undermines experts who can be either just or unjust. If someone disobeys an unjust law, which derives from a certain expertise, then one undermines the authority of the law even when it is just. Socrates and Crito end their discussion by agreeing that one should not retaliate against an evil done to oneself with an action that it also evil. Were Socrates to disobey the law, he would do this very thing. Further, individuals who disagree on this matter cannot usually convince one another of the other's position.

Socrates next turns to give his speech, where he makes several points which are not entirely explicit. Socrates first advances his theory of why the law has authority. Laws have authority not because they command one to do what is truly best. Instead, laws as a system produce good citizens, bring about the flourishing of the city and educate the people on the nature of a good polity. Citizens could not be good individuals without the laws of the community, and since citizens are dependent on the laws of the city for their development and thus their ability to achieve excellence for themselves, they owe the



laws total obedience. For Socrates, rightness is not what makes a law just but the authority of the city and custom (a point which strikingly contrasts with the Socrates of the Apology). Injustice should not be committed - not merely because it can corrupt the soul, although the laws do not address matters of soul - but because breaking the law undermines the general authority and felt force of the laws. The laws when disobeyed are less able to serve their purpose. Finally, disobeying the law often brings about retaliation.

Socrates also argues that obeying the law is required due to a kind of implicit contract argument. Since a citizen is free to leave Athens at any time for another city, his choice to stay must illustrate his acceptance of his duty to obey the law. Socrates ends his speech by arguing that it is better for him to remain in Athens. If he left, he'd either enter a city that was well-governed, in which case he would immediately acquire a reputation as a law-breaker or he'd enter a poorly governed city, in which case he couldn't live a good life. Socrates claims that he stays in prison because of the force of these arguments.



Aristophanes' Clouds

Aristophanes' Clouds Summary and Analysis

Aristophanes, unlike Plato, is not sympathetic to Socrates. He is Athens' greatest satirist, and portrays Socrates in such a way as to mock him. In the *Clouds*, Aristophanes has Socrates claim that Zeus does not exist, advocate new 'cloud-goddesses' to Athens and tell a young man that beating one's father and incest are legitimate. The accusation is that Socrates is an atheist, believes in other gods, and is responsible for the corruption of the youth - charges that will later be seriously repeated against Socrates in the *Apology*. Aristophanes is on the side of Athens.

The plot of the *Clouds* is as follows. Socrates meets Strepsiades. Strepsiades, an Athenian elder, has a son whose self-indulgence has nearly destroyed him financially. He wants Socrates' aid in making a weak speech and argument stronger, and so enters the Socrates 'thinkery'. Strepsiades is a debtor and must learn from Socrates how to twist words to trick his lenders. But Socrates requires Strepsiades to learn more than mere oratory; instead, he must learn about the nature of everything in earth and heaven. Socrates claims there is no Zeus, and that the only gods are the clouds. Strepsiades believes himself too intellectually weak and infirm to finish Socrates' course in argument, theology, and so on. Socrates then refuses to help him because he is stupid.

In response, Strepsiades forces his son Pheidippides to replace him in the course at the 'thinkery.' Pheidippides successfully completes the course and acquires great rhetorical skills that enable him to fool and confuse Strepsiades' creditors. Strepsiades is overjoyed and throws a party in Pheidippides' honor, but the party is ended when the two fight about poetry. Pheidippides now despises the old city songs. He prefers to tell a story about incest written by the poet Euripides. Strepsiades resists and Pheidippides attacks him. He justifies the beating by arguing that the stupid should suffer at the hands of the wise in order to make them better; the father, overwhelmed, agrees. However, Strepsiades can't take any more when Pheidippides wants to attack his mother next. He stops Pheidippides from speaking, disgusted. He then begins to speculate on the great harm that Pheidippides could cause the family now that he rejects the wrongness of incest. Strepsiades repents Socrates' teachings, affirming that he believes Zeus exists and torches Socrates' thinker. Aristophanes even has Hermes advise Strepsiades to do this very thing. At the end of the play, Strepsiades realizes that he needs the authority of Zeus to hold his family together and promote their good.

The *Clouds* is a play, not a Socratic dialogue, but it is one of history's most memorable portrayals of Socrates. We also find within it a reflection of the public perception of Socrates by the Athenians. While many are inclined to find Socrates exceedingly virtuous, one can see the beginnings of a critique of a man who rejects all tradition by the authority of his own intellect, encourages behaviors that are in striking contrast to common moral intuitions, and seeks to destroy the religious faith that many believe bind

the community together. It is not clear that extent to which Aristophanes' Socrates represents the real Socrates, but it certainly represents one public perception of him, a perception so persuasive that it plagues Socrates twenty-four years after its publication during Socrates' trial.



Characters

Socrates

Socrates is the main character of all four of our texts and the only character who appears in them all. He is in fact the main subject of the book. Socrates is in many ways the father of philosophy. He lived from 469-399 B.C. and is considered something of an enigma. He left no writings of his own; we only have accounts of his life from his students Plato and Xenophon and the great Greek satirist, Aristophanes. To this day, the veracity of these writings are questioned. We know that Socrates was very ugly, with wide, bulging eyes; he had long hair, walking around Athens barefoot and without bathing. Socrates never sought riches, fame, honor or anything else. He instead preferred simply to talk about the nature of reality without Athenians, particularly ones of great stature. Socrates often claims that a god or daimon has spoken to him throughout his life, encouraging him to always pursue the truth. The Oracle at Delphi told a friend of his that he was the wisest of all men. Socrates, not believing this, set out to prove it false, but discovered in the end that no one knew anything and that he was the only one who recognized he knew nothing. Thus, he had these two reasons to pursue the truth without obstacle. However, because Socrates often challenged the social mores of Athenian life, he was executed in 399 B.C. by drinking hemlock, a fate forced upon him by a jury of Athenian citizens.

Plato

Plato is not actually a character in the book, but he wrote three of the Socratic dialogues and it is widely presumed that he placed many words in Socrates' mouth that actually illustrate his own views. Thus, the Socrates character in the book reflects the mind of Plato; in this sense, he is a major character. Plato's dialogues all contain Socrates as a character, save The Laws. Plato lived from 429-347 B.C. and is one of history's greatest philosophers have an enormous influence on the history of ideas even to this very day. He is also regarded as one of the great writers of history, due to his wonderfully engaging dialogues. He was an Athenian citizen and he was Socrates' student. His legacy is so profound that almost no philosophy in history ranks with him, save perhaps Aristotle (who was his student), Aquinas, or Kant. Many of Plato's well-known doctrines come through in the Crito and the Euthyphro. Plato's doctrine of the forms is present in the Socratic discussions of the nature of piety and justice. The forms are eternal ideas that never change; they exist independently of human imagination and set the ideal for all things. The form of beauty is the perfect standard of beauty and all beautiful things are related to it - or 'participate' in it. The same is true of the forms justice and piety. These forms have definitions that reflect the form and it is the definition of piety in particular that Socrates is after in The Crito. By coming to grasp the definition of piety, Socrates will then know Piety, the form.



Aristophanes

The famous Greek satirist who wrote the Clouds. A traditionalist and conservative, Socrates mocked Socrates for corrupting the youth and undermining Athenian morality. When reading the Clouds, however, one will find a man quite fond of dirty jokes.

Euthyphro

The acquaintance of Socrates and the other main character of the Euthyphro. He has trouble defining piety and is widely considered an oddball amongst Athenians. He is busy persecuting his father for a crime, something which most Athenians saw as immoral. But Euthyphro believed himself in the right.

Crito

Socrates' friend who tries to get him out of jail in The Crito. Socrates discusses the authority and nature of law with Crito and argues that it is better for him to stay in jail.

Meletus

The prosecutor of Socrates in the Apology.

The Athenian Jury

The jury in Socrates' trial in The Apology. Socrates seems to repeatedly anger them, sometimes repeatedly. They ultimately sentence him to death.

Strepsiades

One of three main characters in the Clouds, Strepsiades is a father who seeks to get out of debt by studying with Socrates.

Pheidippides

The son of Strepsiades who learns philosophy with Socrates. But when he arrives home, his outrageous understanding of morality causes Strepsiades to burn down Socrates' "thinkery."



Zeus

The king of the gods in Greek mythology, Socrates questioned his existence, something that got him into trouble.

Hermes

The messenger of the gods in Greek mythology, Aristophanes has Hermes tell Strepsiades to burn down Socrates' "thinkery."

Socrates' Students

Socrates had many students, among them Plato. After his death, they formed various schools of philosophy that outlined the characteristics of philosophical traditions that continue to the present day.

The god

The divine being that Socrates claimed often spoke to him, giving him advice on how to pursue the truth.



Objects/Places

Athens

The ancient Greek city where Socrates lived and died; it is also the city setting for all four texts in the book.

The Court House

Where Euthyphro and Socrates meet in *The Euthyphro*; they discuss the nature and definition of piety.

The Prison

Where Socrates is placed after the *Apology* and during the *Crito*.

The Court Room

The setting of the *Apology*, where Socrates is charged with his crimes of impiety and corrupting the youth.

Prytaneum

One of the finest housing districts in Athens, where Socrates requested to be fed free meals as punishment for his crimes.

The Clouds

The only gods that Socrates of *The Clouds* believed in.

Hemlock

The poisonous drink Socrates received to bring about his execution.

Free Meals

Socrates' suggestion for his own punishment in the *Apology*. He believes that he deserves free meals served to him in the Prytaneum.



Piety

The subject of the Euthyphro. Socrates asks Euthyphro to define piety, but Euthyphro fails.

Justice

One subject of the Crito, Socrates faces the question of whether he can be just and yet disobey the laws of Athens.

Sophistry

Sophistry is typically understood as a tricky, alluring and misleading form of reasoning, drawing one to accept conclusions that are false or beneficial to the one practicing sophistry. This term of derision derives from Socrates' confrontations with various Sophists throughout the Platonic dialogues.

The Delphic Oracle

The Oracle at Delphi that tells Socrates' friend that he is the wisest of men. Socrates ultimately comes to accept this because he is the only man who knows that he knows nothing.

The Thinkery

The 'Thinkery' is the place in Athens where Socrates and his students think and study in Aristophanes' The Clouds.



Themes

The Noble Philosophical Life

Socrates is the main character of *Four Texts on Socrates* and Socrates' most distinctive personality feature is his unrelentingly pursuit of truth. He is not merely interested in the pursuit of some particular truth, such as an answer to a scientific problem or a quest to solve a theological worry. Instead, he is interested in truth per se. He engages in all manner of inquiry, physics and astronomy when younger but more 'pure' philosophical topics as he ages. Socrates is interested in metaphysics, or the study of what exists, epistemology, or the study of what knowledge is and when we possess it. He is interested in aesthetics, or the nature of beauty and in moral philosophy, or the nature of the right and the good. Socrates also has a concern with justice, the subject of political philosophy. His philosophical concerns also cover the philosophy of religion, mind and language. Socrates' method of pursuing truth is dialogical, meaning that he engages in discussions with anyone in everyone interested in talking with him. However, he usually claims that he knows nothing and questions his interlocutor. Yet when his interlocutor offers up a position or view, Socrates nearly immediately issues a counterargument to see how his interlocutor responds. Socrates is also particularly interested in exposing as fraudulent those members of Athenian society who claim to know the truth, such as politicians, rhetoricians, and sophists. He is intent on showing that no one truly knows anything. His relentless pursuit of the truth eventually leads to his death.

The Nature of Piety and Justice

Socrates, because of his pursuit of truth, is interested in the nature of everything; but he (perhaps due to Plato importing his view into the text) is interested in pursuing the discovery of natures in a particular way. Socrates usually begins with a question, "What is X?" And then he and interlocutors proceed to discuss the matter. Socrates believes that he can discover the nature of things through pure reason and inquiry and sometimes seems to believe that knowledge of natures is within everyone innately and that dialogue simply helps one to remember what one has forgotten due to being trapped in the body. Socrates is particularly interested in the nature of piety in the *Euthyphro*. Euthyphro initially offers the view that piety is what is dear to the gods. Socrates does show that this definition of piety is inadequate. If the gods love things for no reason, then their love is arbitrary. Imitating that love wouldn't be piety because it wouldn't be a virtue. However, if the gods love things for some reason, then there is already a standard of their love. Thus we should inquire into the nature of that standard. While the *Republic* is the dialogue directly concerned with the nature of justice, Socrates is interested in it in the *Apology* and the *Crito*. He is interested in whether justice demands submitting one's self to the laws of the city or whether the pursuit of truth should lead one to disobey. In the *Apology*, he seems to believe that justice allows him to disobey and sometimes demands it, whereas in the *Crito*, Socrates appears to have the opposite view.



Socrates as Threat to Athenian Society

Throughout the latter three texts, there is a theme of asking whether Socrates is a threat to Athenian society. This accusation has followed Socrates for decades, particularly due to Aristophanes' critique of Socrates in *The Clouds*. There Aristophanes portrays Socrates' rigorous questioning as crazy and leading to odd, counter-intuitive positions. Socrates corrupts Pheidippides with his questioning as a result, leading Pheidippides to attack his father, suggest attack his mother and defend the permissibility of incest. Further, Socrates rejects the existence of the Greek gods, threatening to undermine the social morality of Athens that many Greeks believe the gods themselves enforce.

These accusations are prominent in *The Apology*. In fact, the accusations of impiety and corrupting the youth are brought against Socrates by Meletus precisely because they threaten to undermine the stability of the Athenian polity. If Socrates' impiety became widespread, then morality would lose its force and piety would evaporate. If Socrates' corruption of the youth was allowed to continue, respect for elders would deteriorate and the aristocracy would be ridiculed by their inappropriately behaving children. Socrates also seems impervious to changing his mind; the Athenians cannot convince Socrates to cease doing philosophy, with all of its socially deleterious effects. Socrates would rather die than stop doing philosophy. An Athenian jury, therefore, when faced with Socrates' brazen rejection of Athenian morality, law and custom, sentences him to death. Oddly, near death, Socrates in the *Crito* defends the absolute authority of Athenian law, which he cites as a reason for him not to escape prison.



Style

Perspective

Three major perspectives pervade *Four Texts on Socrates*. The first is that of the compiler and writer of the introduction, Thomas G. West. West wants to use the example of Socrates to inspire Western people to believe that achieving knowledge of the truth is possible; he wants his reader to regain faith in the ability of reason to teach one about reality. This perspective is brief, however. The major perspectives are those of Plato and Aristophanes, and they could not be more distinct. Plato believes that Socrates is one of history's great heroes and that he died a martyr to the philosophical pursuit of the truth. He constantly portrays Socrates as upright, virtuous and intent of the noble pursuit of the truth; he sees Socrates' going to his death as one of the noblest things one could do, not to mention the virtue required to have the courage to stand up against the errors of one's society that Socrates displayed throughout his life. However, Aristophanes sees Socrates very different. Socrates' use of philosophy, on Aristophanes' view, is largely corrupting. It leads him to eccentric, silly behavior and to accepting bizarre and socially destruction positions. Socrates is portrayed as ridiculous, crazy, arrogant, obsessed with bizarre things, impious and dangerous. Socrates is portrayed as teaching Pheidippides that incest isn't morally wrong and that beating up one's father and mother is permitted. Strepsiades comes to reject Socrates' purported wisdom and believe that true wisdom consists in relying on the cultural, moral and religious traditions of Athens.

Tone

The tone of *Four Texts on Socrates* varies according to the author who is speaking. The brief passage by Thomas West has a tone of social criticism and hope. West believes that faith in reason has been lost but that it can be regained through the inspiring life of Socrates. Again, though, this part of the book is brief (although it sets the texts in a wider context). The tone of Plato's dialogues varies. The tone of the *Euthyphro* is set by Socrates' rigorous questioning of Crito on the nature of piety. The tone often seems light-hearted, exciting and noble because the dialogue concerns ultimate and transcendent things. However, the tone of the *Apology* seems different. Everyone seems to know that Socrates is not held in high esteem by most Athenians but many believe he can escape his crimes with minor punishments. However, Socrates deliberative provokes the jury, earning him a death sentence far out of proportion with the accusations brought against him, even if they were true. The *Apology* grows darker and stranger as the text progresses, as it becomes clear that Socrates is going to stand up for his ideals to the death. Yet there is a ray of beauty and admiration in the tone because what Socrates does is considered heroic. The tone changes entirely in *The Clouds*. Aristophanes is a satirist, filling the clouds with ridiculous bodily humor, cursing, insults, absurd behavior and deep social critique. The tone is light-hearted and interested in skewering Socrates.

Structure

The structure of the book has five main parts. The first part is an introduction to the four main texts written by the one of the book's compilers, Thomas G. West. In the introduction, West decries the modern rejection of reason and the Socratic alternative. He then summarizes each of the four main texts, the Euthyphro, the Apology, the Crito and The Clouds. He adds commentaries on each of the texts in the summaries. The book then divides into the four dialogues. The first three dialogues were written by Plato and they are all connected. The Euthyphro takes place at the court house, where Socrates is to be tried for crimes leveled against him by Meletus. The Apology covers most of the trial and sentencing, whereas the Crito occurs during Socrates' imprisonment and before his execution. They present Socrates as an upright, noble and ingenious man with no patience for the imposition of cultural and religious tradition being imposed upon his search for truth. The texts occur in dialogue form for the most part, and are exchanges between Socrates and some other character or characters. Most of the time, Socrates is questioning someone or other. However, in the Apology, Socrates makes three speeches, which is unusual for a Socratic dialogue. The Clouds, however, is much different. The Clouds was written by the great Greek satirist Aristophanes, who is clearly a critic of Socrates, not an admirer. Further, The Clouds is a play, not a true dialogue, and mocks Socrates savagely. The clouds is full of many - and some unusual - characters with the point, apparently, to accuse Socrates of impiety and corrupting the youth, charges that Meletus would bring against him twenty-four years later in part due to the continued popularity of the Clouds.



Quotes

"So tell me now, before Zeus, what you just now strongly affirmed that you know plainly: what sort of things do you say the pious and the impious are, concerning murder and concerning other things?" (46)

"Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved?" (52)

"Not because [the thing loved] is sometimes loved, is it loved by those by whom it is loved, but because it is loved, it is something loved." (53)

"And in particular [Chaerephon] once even went to Delphi and dared to consult the oracle about this ... and he asked whether there was anyone wiser than I. The Pythia replied that no one was wiser." (69)

"I, men of Athens, salute you and love you, but I will obey the god rather than you; and as long as I breathe and am able to, I will certainly not stop philosophizing, and I will exhort you and explain this to whomever of you I happen to meet, and I will speak just the sorts of things I am accustomed to ..." (81)

"So if I must propose what I am worthy of in accordance with the just, I propose this: to be given my meals in the Prytaneum." (91)

"But now it is time to go away, I to die and you to live. Which of us goes to a better thing is unclear to everyone except to the god." (97)

"And that you must revere and give way to and fawn upon a fatherland more than a father when it is angry with you, and either persuade it or do whatever it bids." (110)

"Then let it go, Crito, and let us act in this way, since in this way the god is leading." (114)

"I tread on air and contemplate the sun." (124)

"Yes, and I will make it clearly apparent, by Zeus, that I was beating you with justice." (169)

"How mad I was, when I even threw out the gods because of Socrates!" (175)

"After them! Strike! Hit them because of many things, but most of all since I know that they were doing injustice to the gods!" (176)



Topics for Discussion

Please outline the main line of argument in the Euthyphro.

Euthyphro's dilemma is a famous case of a philosophical argument about the nature of piety. What dilemma does Socrates place Euthyphro in with respect to his initial definition of piety?

Give three of Socrates' defenses of himself in the Apology. Do you find them convincing? Why or why not?

What do you think Socrates was trying to accomplish in the Apology? Was he honestly defending himself? Trying to be executed? Give your own view and defend it.

What is one of Socrates' argument on behalf of the authority of the law in the Crito?

Why does Socrates think that death is not a harm in the Crito?

Do you think Socrates' views about the authority of the law differ between the Apology and the Crito? If so, how?

Do you think Aristophanes' critique of Socrates is fair? What aspects of it strike you as accurate?

Plato believes that Socrates was a hero, Aristophanes a ridiculous but dangerous villain. Who is right and why?