

Q. What justification was there for Socrates' trial, verdict and death sentence?

Athens, known for its enthusiasm for new ideas, had gone down in history as a centre of new ideas, and was called the "school of Hellas," which attracted philosophers from near and far. So why was 'the wisest man,' who distributed opinions and ideas put to death? Were his trial, the two charges Socrates was blamed upon, and the resulting verdict justified?

Socrates was brought to trial in 399 B.C, by three accusers, and citizens of Athens – Meletus, Anytus and Lycon. The jury in the trial, and the three accusers considered Socrates a sophist, corrupter and a nuisance. They defeated Socrates on two charges, "*corrupting the minds of the young,*" and "*believing in supernatural things of his own invention instead of gods recognised by the state,*"¹ and as a result, he was put to death. I believe these two charges were neither justified, nor fair. For the first charge, of corrupting the youth of Athens, as Socrates argued in his defence speech, he never considered himself a teacher, and never charged a fee. In my opinion, the 'pupils' of Socrates were not forced to, but chose to follow Socrates and imitate his ways. They copied his questioning methods, often rudely, when he was not even present. Socrates said himself, in the Apology, that he does not solely influence the young, but that everyone in the community has affect, and that he can not prevent who they choose to believe in, and admire. On the other hand, Socrates did question people in society in such a way that demoralised them, and broadcasted they had untrue knowledge. His method of questioning prominent people, such as poets, was called elenchus. Meletus represented the poets in the trial. It was seen as destructive by people, especially when Socrates was on a mission from the Delphic Oracle to seek a man of supreme knowledge. He would claim ignorance on a particular subject, and then claim the interlocutor had inadequate knowledge. He may have been seen as a bad 'role model,' because the young followed by example, and I would suspect he never told them to do otherwise, as he believed strongly in his ways of philosophising. Socrates had also "*caused Anytus' own son to question his father's wisdom and his qualifications.*" This could either show that Anytus despised of Socrates for personal reasons, or it could be taken as proof that his ways of philosophising were truly teaching the young to break up moral values, such as questioning parents in society.

The second charge was also in a way unfair, because there was a policy of freedom of speech at that time in Athens. He talked about his daimon, which was not a traditional god, but to be brought to trial for this would be contradicting this 'freedom.' Athens was also known as a place for new ideas, and his ideas were instead criticised. He did worship the God Apollo, a recognised by the state, which also contradicts the charge that he did not believe in the orthodox gods. One of the gods that Socrates also believed in was the Delphic Oracle, who prophesised there was '*no one*' wiser than Socrates. His mission in life was to seek a man of supreme knowledge. It is known that when the people of Athens questioned the Oracle during the Peloponnesian war, it prophesised that Sparta would be victorious. Therefore, there was prejudice against this 'God,' and Socrates could have been despised for following it, and basing his life mission and philosophising on its prophesy. I believe this is not fair, because the Athenians, probably including the jury members, remembered old times and were bias towards this charge. Another reason that this charge is unfair is because Religious cults from other countries were widely tolerated inside Athens, and yet they charged Socrates for believing in a god, which was foreign to society.

Socrates believed he would loose the case by '*rumours,*' of those who remembered old times and negative connotations, including the previous plays, who portrayed him both as 'corrupting a

¹ Apology, p. 46

main character and pupil,' and as a Sophist. Some of the ideas in which Sophists believed were considered impious, because they 'made the weaker arguments stronger,' and 'questioned things in the heavens and below the earth.' Many of the jurors had seen these plays in their youth, and grew up with the feelings that Socrates was a 'bad character.' This is not just, because it meant that the jury were not willing to fully accept both sides of the argument, as they did not favour Socrates. He was also friends with Anaxagoras, who had been in court on a charge of impiety – which could have added suspicion towards Socrates by methods of association. It was said in the charges that he believed in gods not recognised by the state. What further contradicts this is in the same play, the '*Clouds*,' where Socrates was portrayed as an atheist – someone who believes in no gods at all.

The trial of Socrates was contradictory. Socrates had lived for seventy years in Athens, and had never been accused for his methods of philosophising before. It is suspicious that these feelings were suddenly brought against him, when the feelings of abhorrence towards him were already implanted several years before. This makes me believe there was a hidden agenda in the minds of the jury, and the three accusers. During the Peloponnesian War, Socrates had faithfully served Athens. When they lost the battle, the Spartans brought in power, the Thirty Tyrants, which ruled Athens for a number of months. Socrates was believed to be the teacher of people who later became traitors to Athens, such as Alcibiades and Critias. Critias was part of the Thirty Tyrants, who terrorised Athens in 404 B.C, just five years before Socrates' trial. During this time, thousands were either executed or banished from the city. Many Athenians chose to flee the city during this time. Socrates did not exile with the democrats, but stayed in the city. This would have been seen as supporting the regime, and hate built up in the eyes of the Athenian citizens, because Socrates had taught this man who created the tragedy. This incident would be prominent in the minds of the jury, and they therefore would have a set dislike for Socrates, and a bias. He also did not suffer at the palms of the thirty Tyrants unlike his principal accuser, Anytus, who lost much of his property when he fled and joined the fight to free the city. This is another reason why Anytus could have brought Socrates to trial. If this is so, the charges were not just, because this was a hidden agenda, which Socrates may not have prepared for. Because this event was so close to his trial, I believe they "*executed Socrates, the sophist, because he was clearly responsible for the education of Critias, one of the thirty anti-democratic leaders*", that this was the real reason Socrates was brought into court. The trial was totally legal, but the charges I believe probably were to cover the fact that they wanted to get rid of a man who was anti-democratic, and had followers – which was thought could lead to another revolution.

If there was thought that Socrates could cause another revolution, there is also conflicting evidence. He acted against the Thirty Tyrants, when he refused the order of arresting "*wealthy resident alien Leon of Salamis*²", who was to be executed. Socrates instead stayed home, and obviously did not uphold the values of the temporary government, because he certainly risked being killed for this act. He even showed his loyalty to Athenian government in the '*Crito*,' where he says he never left the city of Athens, except on military missions, which shows he accepted the laws, and therefore had to abide by them. This is a major reason why Socrates did not escape when the death sentence was pronounced. Socrates believed that the trial was fair, because he was not afraid of death, and wanted to die. I believe Socrates could have easily won his case if he had wanted to, even if the jury was bias. He could have proclaimed 'freedom of speech,' proposed banishment, or a fine. Socrates also had a family, which would be without a father, and would lack provisions. But, it was said that Socrates hardly provided for his family, and left them poor, because of his need to prophesise. He also did not try to win the case by bringing his family into court, to appeal to the emotional side of the jury. Therefore he did not want to win the case on this

² 'A New Apology for Socrates' by I.F. Stone.

argument. Even though there was much dislike of Socrates, already positioned in the minds of those at the trial, the votes after Socrates' defence speech were very close, with a mere difference of eighty votes not on his side. When Socrates proposed "*free maintenance by the state,*" and antagonised the jury, I began to see how he did not try his hardest to win the case, and therefore did not in a way, deserve to live. He annoyed the jury so much in this part of the case, "*I go to die,*" Socrates says, "*and you to live, but which of us goes to the better lot is known to none but God,*"³ continually mocked them, that most of those who had voted for acquittal, now voted for the death penalty. The trial was completely legal, and even if the 500 man jury was bias because of previous bad connotations about Socrates, he was still rude and refused to speak the required language in court. This reminded me that if he had been banished, or had won his defence, Socrates would continue his methods of philosophising, angering more people.

In conclusion, I believe the two charges were not justified; the way in which the trial was conducted was justified, but that the outcome, his death sentence, was too radical. Even though Socrates claimed the court system was corrupt, it was fair for all Athenians, and lasted one day, so was fair in that sense. It gave him the right to speak, and he could have easily won the case, being the so called 'wisest man in the world.' He infuriated the jury so intensely, by saying he would refuse to stop prophesying, and owed a greater obedience to his god than to them. Therefore, Socrates I believe had the right to be brought to trial in this light, and even if it was because of prejudice against him, it was his own fault for antagonising and his constant criticism, and the plays would have never have been created otherwise. Even though he did not force pupils to copy his ways, he also did no good by practising these methods in public, which broke down the morals of society, and set him out as a bad role model. His three Accusers probably wanted the fair punishment of banishment from Athens, and never considered putting him to death as a reality, until he left them no choice, proclaiming such a ridiculous counter-proposal. He had no dream of leaving the city he had spent his whole life in, and had not the money to propose a heavy fine. The death penalty was not fair, if the jury were already bias in so many ways, and of the large amount of confliction about the two charges. However, Socrates played into the hands of the jury, by not acting in the way recognised by the court in the duration of his trial. He antagonised them continually through the trial, bringing up memories of how he criticised those while philosophising inside the city, and his reputation. I believe Socrates was a scapegoat for the problems inside Athens. The actual trial itself was legal, but I believe the charges which brought him to trial were merely to cover up a deep hatred for Socrates, as a result of his contacts, and teachings of traitors, and the Peloponnesian War. Even fifty years after Socrates died; nobody had denounced the trial and his death. It find it suspicious that the accusers chose to convict Socrates at this late date – he was seventy, and surely in a few years he would have died of natural causes, and then he would no longer annoy people.

³ Socrates – speaking in his trial in 399 B.C, as told by Plato.