

Socrates' Mission

“Be sure that this is what the god orders me to do, and I think there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god. For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul.” These words, as recorded by Plato in *Apology*, were spoken by the philosopher Socrates at his trial in 399 B.C. Since the age of 40, Socrates had been living the philosophical life. Now, at the age of 80, Socrates is delivering his famous defense of his life as he is brought up on charges that could result in execution.

Socrates was born in Athens, Greece, in 469 B.C. He spent the first 40 years of his life working as a stonecutter. Then, he went through a crisis that resulted in him taking a different road and beginning the philosophical life. According to Jouett's *Introduction*, “He had no classroom, gave no formal instruction and took no pay. He only walked about the places where Athenians congregated, the streets, the market place and the gymnasium, or sat in the houses of acquaintances, talking cheerily to whoever stopped to listen.” He continued this philosophical life until 399 B.C., when he was convicted and executed.

The charges brought against Socrates by Anytus, Meletus, and Lycon, according to Plato's *Apology*, were as follows: “Socrates is guilty of corrupting the

young and of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things.” The real charge, however, was that his accusers opposed his philosophical life. Believing that this life was divinely inspired, Socrates was unwilling to turn away from it, even in the face of death.

Socrates was on a divine mission to challenge the Athenians to seek out the perfection of the soul. In the following paragraphs, we’ll examine this divine mission. We’ll begin by looking at the crisis that led Socrates to go on this mission and what exactly the mission was. Then, we’ll look at examples of how Socrates went about fulfilling his mission and where it ultimately led him.

Socrates began living the philosophical life in pursuit of his mission as a result of a crisis that occurred in his life at the age of 40. Prior to his crisis, he worked as a stonecutter, but then, as a result of a trip to Delphi, all this was about to change.

Chaerephon, a close friend of Socrates from youth, went to Delphi and asked the oracle if any man was wiser than Socrates. The answer was that no one was wiser. In Xenophon’s *Apology*, this event is recorded as follows: “Once on a time when Chaerephon made inquiry at the Delphic oracle concerning me, in the presence of many people Apollo answered that no man was more free than I, or more just, or more prudent.” Upon hearing this answer, according to Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates asked himself, “Whatever does the god mean? What is his

riddle? I am very conscious that I am not wise at all; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest? For surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do so.”

Socrates began his investigation into the meaning of this riddle by going to various people who were reputed to be wise, thinking that he would be able to find somebody wiser than himself. He went to politicians, poets, and craftsmen, but he had a similar experience wherever he went. What he found was that these people appeared to be wise to many and themselves, but they were really not very wise at all. He was unable to convince them of this, though, and they began to dislike him. He concluded the following, as recorded in Plato’s *Apology*: “I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.” In other words, it is better to be ignorant than in error. Socrates thus concluded that what the god meant was, “This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless.”

It was with this understanding that Socrates began his mission. He describes it in Plato’s *Apology* as follows: “So even now I continue this investigation as the god bade me—and I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I

think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise.” Socrates believed that he was the god’s gift to the Athenians and that he was to act to them as a gadfly acts towards a thoroughbred horse. Just as a gadfly irritates the horse and drives it to action, so would Socrates “never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company.” At his trial, he described his overall question to the Athenians as follows: “Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?” Perfection of the soul consists of truth and goodness, and all of Socrates philosophical life was spent encouraging the Athenians to seek out truth and goodness instead of wealth, reputation, and honor.

Now that we’ve examined the cause of Socrates’ mission and his desire to help the Athenians seek out the perfection of their souls, we’ll look at the various ways that Socrates went about fulfilling his mission. According to Xenophon’s *Defense of Socrates*, “Socrates lived ever in the open; for early in the morning he went to the public promenades and training-grounds; in the forenoon he was seen in the market; and the rest of the day he passed just where most people were to be

met; he was generally talking, and anyone might listen.” It was in this openness that Socrates sought to help people seek the perfection of their souls.

Frequently, the people that he would be speaking with would not yet be capable of his instruction. These people were beasts, and they had to be trained before they could be educated. Once they were trained, Socrates could consider them students and begin educating them.

An example of Socrates’ beast training skills can be found in Xenophon’s *Socrates Educates Euthydemus*. Euthydemus was a wealthy young man in Athens who sought to become a politician. He had acquired a large collection of books by various poets and professors, and because of his collection, he thought that he was wise.

In order to begin training Euthydemus, Socrates would go with his companions to where he knew he could find Euthydemus and there begin speaking of him. Through Socratic irony and gentle ridicule, Socrates would gain Euthydemus’ attention. For example, Socrates said the following of Euthydemus: “Well gentlemen, when our friend Euthydemus has attained his full powers, and some question of policy is before the Assembly, he won’t be backward in offering advice; that is obvious from his behaviour. I fancy he has prepared a noble exordium to his addresses, with due care not to give the impression that he is indebted to anyone for his knowledge.”

Once he was sure that he had gained Euthydemus' attention, Socrates decided to approach him alone, this time not in irony or ridicule, but rather to begin a conversation. To gain Euthydemus' interest and to keep him from getting defensive, Socrates questioned him in regards to his book collection and praised his pursuit of wisdom. Once Euthydemus' interest was gained and a conversation was begun, Socrates then proceeded to show Euthydemus that he wasn't as wise as he thought. Euthydemus claimed to know the works of justice, but Socrates showed him that it wasn't as simple as he thought. At one point, Euthydemus admitted the following to Socrates: "Nay, Socrates, I have lost all confidence in my answers; for all the opinions that I expressed before seem now to have taken an entirely different form." Euthydemus eventually "went away very dejected, disgusted with himself and convinced that he was indeed a slave." Despite his initial humiliation, though, Euthydemus continued to spend time with Socrates, and Socrates "began to expound very plainly and clearly the knowledge that he thought most needful and the practices that he held to be most excellent."

In Socrates' encounter with Euthydemus, Socrates spends considerable time encouraging Euthydemus to seek out truth. Euthydemus thinks that he knows the truth about what the works of justice are and what things are good, but Socrates is able to show him that his understanding of truth is in error.

According to Adler's *The Liar and the Skeptic*, "the objective aspect [of truth] lies in the agreement of correspondence between what an individual believes or opines and the reality about which he is making a judgment when he holds a certain belief or opinion." Carlson's *Classical or Realist View of Philosophy* defines truth as "the agreement between the meaning of a statement/proposition and the fact/reality." Socrates shows Euthydemus that his statements regarding justice and goodness do not always agree with reality, thus his statements regarding justice and goodness cannot be true. Adler goes on to say that, "About matters of truth, dispute is fruitful . . . Wisdom does not counsel us here to desist from the effort to reach agreement. Disagreement about matters of truth is not, in the final reckoning, to be tolerated." We can see Socrates persist to seek out truth in Plato's *Euthyphro*.

Socrates encountered Euthyphro on his way to his trial. Euthyphro was in the process of bringing charges against his father. Socrates asked Euthyphro for a definition of piety. Initially, Euthyphro gave Socrates examples instead of a definition. When pressed further, Euthyphro defined piety as that which is dear to the gods. Socrates then showed Euthyphro that this is not a true definition since it violates the principle of non-contradictions. Since different things are dear to different gods, it is a contradiction to say that piety is that which is dear to the gods. No resolution was reached in this encounter. Towards the end, Socrates said

to Euthyphro, “Now I know well that you believe you have clear knowledge of piety and impiety. So tell me, my good Euthyphro, and do not hide what you think it is.” Euthyphro answered as follows: “Some other time, Socrates, for I am in a hurry now, and it is time for me to go.”

Along with truth, goodness is a major aspect of perfection of the soul. One way that Socrates encouraged goodness in the Athenians was by encouraging them to revere the gods. In Xenophon’s *With Aristodemus on Religion*, Socrates has a conversation with Aristodemus, an atheist, in this regard. Once Socrates is able to convince Aristodemus that all creations must have a creator, Aristodemus replies, “Really, Socrates, I don’t despise the godhead. But I think it is too great to need my service.” Socrates then describes to Aristodemus the great gifts given to mankind by the godhead, followed by this statement: “Just as by serving men you find out who is willing to serve you in return . . . so try the gods by serving them, and see whether they will vouchsafe to counsel you in matters hidden from man.” Similarly, Socrates says to Euthydemus in *With Euthydemus on Religion*, “For these reasons it behoves us not to despise the things that are unseen, but, realizing their power in their manifestations, to honor the godhead.”

The theme of goodness is also explored in Plato’s *Crito*. Crito had come to Socrates the day before his execution to encourage him to escape. Through their conversation, Socrates and Crito come to the agreement that, “One should never do

wrong in return, nor mistreat any man, no matter how one has been mistreated by him.” Socrates believes that he would be mistreating the Athenians that he has lived his entire life with if he were to escape from prison, and to do so would be the opposite of goodness.

Though Socrates lived the philosophical life and spent his days encouraging the Athenians to perfect their souls, they ultimately rejected his call to truth and goodness. He was found guilty of the charges brought against him and condemned to death. He did not let this discourage him, though. In Plato’s *Phaedo*, he tells his followers that he is looking forward to death. He believes that by separating his soul from his body, he will be able to discover true wisdom. He says the following: “It really has been shown to us that, if we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself.” He believes that the passions and frailties of the body create distractions from seeking true knowledge. He asks his followers, “Will then a true lover of wisdom, who has a similar hope and knows that he will never find it to any extent except in Hades, be resentful of dying and not gladly undertake the journey thither?” Socrates tells them that “the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death.”

Socrates was on a divine mission to challenge the Athenians to seek out the perfection of the soul. He did this by encouraging them to seek out goodness and

truth in everything they did. He challenged their assumptions and understandings of things, and he never hesitated to show them where they were wrong or where they needed to spend more thought.

Though, while living, they did not appreciate his role as a gadfly, he ultimately had a profound effect on the Greek culture. Plato, one of his disciples, went on to establish his Academy on a private estate outside the walls of Athens. According to Jouett's *Introduction*, "Before long, the Academy was drawing students from all over the Greek world. It continued to do so for some nine hundred years." The mission of Socrates continues today as people are called to perfect their souls through his teachings preserved in the writings of Plato, Xenophon and others. Socrates provides for us one of the greatest examples of a perfected soul, and of him, Plato says, as Jouett records, "I would not hesitate to call [him] the most righteous man of that time."