Trial and Death of Socrates

The Athenian government tried Socrates, the famous Greek philosopher and teacher, for his teaching methods. He encouraged his students to question what they were taught and to think for themselves, something which government officials greatly disfavored.

Why did this trial happen? Socrates had been teaching the young men of Athens for decades. No one had accused him of corrupting the youth of Athens before. Why did they do so in 399 BC - and - who were his accusers?

Athenian democracy had gone through a couple of really difficult periods, particularly in the four years before Socrates was accused:

- During a four-month period, between 411-410 BC; and

- During a slightly longer period between 404-403 BC.

During those two time frames, a group of men, known as the Thirty Tyrants, overthrew Athenian democracy and took over the city's government. Two of the movement's main leaders - Critias and Alcibiades - had been pupils of Socrates.

Critias was apparently a cruel man. In "The Trial of Socrates," I.F. Stone says that Critias was "the first Robespierre" who was "determined to remake the city to his own anti-democratic mold whatever the human cost."

These attacks against Athenian democracy, and the resulting horrors caused by the Thirty Tyrants, may have caused Athenians to reassess their view of Socrates and his methods. His teachings, which may have seemed harmless before, were harmless no longer.

Now, his endless questioning and icy logic seemed to have bred a group of men who had become tyrants. No longer just an eccentric old man, was Socrates himself an enemy of the common man and democracy? Three accusers - Meletus, a poet, together with Anytus and Lycon - seemed to think so.

Meletus summoned Socrates to attend a preliminary hearing to determine whether he should be charged with crimes. When the magistrate determined legal proceedings could be commenced against Socrates, he was indicted.

Although the actual indictment document is lost to history, it was still available in the second century, AD, when Diogenes Laertius reports the charges, as follows:

> *This indictment and affidavit is sworn by Meletus, the son of Meletus of Pitthos, against Socrates, the son of Sophroniscus of Alopece: Socrates is guilty of refusing to recognize the gods recognized by the state, and of introducing new divinities. He is also guilty of corrupting the youth. The penalty demanded is death.*

This video clip takes us through the trial of Socrates, as reported by Plato in his *Apology*. At the time, Plato - one of Socrates' students - was 27 years old. He was a spectator at the event, not one of the 500 jurors who were all men of Athens.

Anytus seems to have been Socrates' primary accuser. In Plato's *Meno*, we can sense some of the animosity Anytus had toward Socrates:

> *Socrates, I think that you are too ready to speak evil of men: and, if you will take my advice, I would recommend you to be careful.*

Socrates was not willing to take that (or any other) advice, continuing to speak his mind - and stating the reasons for his beliefs - during his trial.

In the back-reaches of history, dozens of accounts describing Socrates' three-hour speech in his own defense - known as his *apologia* - once existed. All but two - those of Plato and Xenophon - are now lost.

Both surviving accounts agree on a major point. Socrates was anything but apologetic in his own defense.

In Plato's version, Socrates continues his questioning ways. Although *he* is the accused, he questions Meletus about the charges he has brought. Then, defiantly, Socrates addresses the people of Athens, and his jurors, with these words (from Plato's *Apology*):

> *Men of Athens* [because women did not participate in these types of proceedings]*, I honor and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy.*

In short ... Socrates is not backing-down, whatsoever, from the actions which got him into trouble in the first place.

At the time of Socrates' trial, in 399 BC, Athenian juries did not receive instructions from a trial judge. Instead, they had to decide for themselves, based on their own understanding of the law and the facts, whether to convict or acquit Socrates.

At the end of their deliberations, the jury was divided. Of the 500 ballots cast:

- 280 jurors found Socrates guilty
- 220 jurors found Socrates not guilty.

During the penalty phase of the trial, both sides suggested a method of punishment for the jury to consider:

- The accusers demanded death.
- Socrates proposed that he should be rewarded, not punished.

Suggesting that he receive free meals in a public Athenian dining hall, Socrates must have known he would anger the jury. This was a surprising move by the defendant who could have requested exile.

Exile would likely have been an acceptable compromise result, especially when the guilty/not-guilty vote was so close. So why did Socrates risk getting the jurors upset?

Perhaps the philosopher was ready to die. Death, as he would say, was not something to fear.

When pressed to offer a real punishment, Socrates proposed a fine which equated to roughly a fifth of his net worth. Plato, and others, added to that proposed offer, but it still seemed like an insufficient punishment for an unrepentant, convicted defendant.

Diogenes Laertius, in his second-century account, reports the results of the trial's penalty phase:

- 360 jurors voted for death
- 140 jurors voted for the fine.

Under Athenian law, execution - in a case like this - would occur when the defendant drank a cup of poisonous hemlock.

In his *Apology*, Plato attributes these words to Socrates as the convicted-and-doomed defendant is led away to jail:

> *The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways - I to die, and you to live. Which to the better fate is known only to God.*

Socrates spent his final hours in an Athenian jail whose ruins still exist. When he drank the hemlock, the poison did not quickly kill him. Instead, the hemlock caused a painful and gradual paralysis of Socrates' central nervous system.

As far as historians can tell, the trial of Socrates produced the world's first free-speech martyr.

As we think about Socrates' actions in provoking the jury, which resulted in his sentence of death, this question comes to mind. Did Socrates believe that he needed to drink the hemlock in order to fulfil his life's mission?

Jacques-Louis David imagined what it must have been like when Socrates died. The French painter created the work, depicted at the top of this page, in 1787. The oil-on-canvas is currently owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Click on the image for a much-better view.

Credits:

Image online, courtesy Web Gallery of Art.

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Media Stream

Plato - Teacher of Aristotle

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